What remains amiss? Film bodies, traumatic experience and absence in the cinematic encounter with the essay film

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**WHAT REMAINS AMISS?: FILM BODIES, TRAUMATIC
EXPERIENCE AND ABSENCE IN THE CINEMATIC ENCOUNTER
WITH THE ESSAY FILM**

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SCHOOL OF HUMANITIES AND SOCIAL SCIENCES

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**What Remains Amiss?: Film Bodies, Traumatic Experience and Absence in the
Cinematic Encounter with the Essay Film**

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Abstract

What Remains Amiss? addresses film bodies, traumatic experience, absence and failure in essay films that focus on tumultuous periods in Cambodian and Indonesian history. The primary texts this project analyzes are Rithy Panh's *S21: The Khmer Rouge Killing Machine* (*S-21, la machine de mort Khmère rouge*, 2003) and *Duch, Master of the Forges of Hell* (*Duch, le maître des forges de l'enfer*, 2011), as well as Joshua Oppenheimer's *The Act of Killing* (2012) and *The Look of Silence* (2014). All four films gesture towards the recuperation of images that represent the victims of Khmer Rouge era Cambodia, and the 1965–66 killings of Indonesia “Communists” respectively. This dissertation then explores the cinematic encounters generated between the embodied spectator and the essay films which essay the traumatic events that shaped the socio-political landscapes of Cambodia and Indonesia.

Can these films be read as facilitating a mode of discourse that recuperates traumatic events and experiences of the past—that have been repressed by ruling regimes or untimely forgotten—not solely through the film bodies projected on the screen but also the absences engendered by such film images? Following Christopher Pavsek, this project seeks to examine the claim that “the means for resolving the insufficiency of the present [could] lie at hand . . . perhaps not ready-at-hand, but nonetheless available, if only we might find them” within the cinema, not as the mechanical god which bestows answers through the presence of what is projected onscreen but rather the dark mirror of humanity that enables us to perceive the ruptures and absences both onscreen and in our own lives (*The Utopia of Film* 241).

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**What Remains Amiss?: Film Bodies, Traumatic Experience and Absence in the
Cinematic Encounter with the Essay Film**

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HSS/English, Nanyang Technological University
Dissertation

Experience seems even to function as a residual concept—what remains or is left over when meaning and language do not exhaust their objects.

Dominick LaCapra, *History in Transit* 39

What Remains Amiss? addresses film bodies, traumatic experience, and absence in essay films. These essay films inquire into the atrocities wrought during tumultuous periods of Cambodian and Indonesian history. The primary texts this dissertation analyzes are Rithy Panh's *S21: The Khmer Rouge Killing Machine* (*S-21, la machine de mort Khmère rouge*, 2003) and *Duch, Master of the Forges of Hell* (*Duch, le maître des forges de l'enfer*, 2011), as well as Joshua Oppenheimer's *The Act of Killing* (2012) and *The Look of Silence* (2014). Panh's and Oppenheimer's films respectively focus on Cambodia's Year Zero convulsion under the rule of the Khmer Rouge and the 1965–66 killings of Indonesia "Communists" and ethnic Chinese by paramilitaries acting under the implicit authority of Suharto's New Order regime.

Although the scholarly fields of trauma studies and film studies have examined in great detail Western perspectives and texts concerning traumatic events (the Holocaust being the prime subject matter), there has been less critical work dedicated to non-Western experiences and texts concerning historical trauma and even fewer on spectatorial embodiment and the sensory experiences and affects generated through cinematic encounters

with films that deal with historical trauma. This dissertation then explores the cinematic encounters generated between the embodied spectator and the essay films which essay the traumatic events that shaped the socio-political landscapes of Cambodia and Indonesia.

Introduction

On Trauma, Trans(Nationality/Mission), and the Essay Film

Trauma as a concept as it was first developed in Western thinking was informed by the “interlocking areas of ‘law, psychiatry and industrialized warfare’” (Luckhurst 19, cited in Buelens, Durrant and Eaglestone 1). Following Luckhurst, trauma as concept “is neither fully material or somatic, nor simply psychic, nor fully cultural or easily located in its appropriative or disruptive relation to the symbolic order, but a point at which all these currents meet” (Buelens, Durrant and Eaglestone 1). Never fixed and always in flux because it is a “point of intersection” for so many other discourses (the ethical, the criminal, the empirical), trauma, much like the essay film, is difficult to be categorically defined, in fact, resists such strict definition. In the preface to *Trauma: Explorations in Memory* (1995), Cathy Caruth’s seminal edited volume in the field (as noted by Vermeulen, Buelens, Durrant and Eaglestone), the fundamental problem of trauma is identified, namely “how to relieve suffering, and how to understand the nature of the suffering, without eliminating the force and truth of the reality that trauma survivors face and quite often try to transmit to us?” (vii). Working through Freud, and the horrors of World War I and the Holocaust, Caruth oddly ends off with a postulation that “trauma itself may provide the very link between cultures: not as a simple understanding of the pasts of others but rather, within the traumas of contemporary history,” as if traumatic events (across geographical, temporal and cultural regions) can ever be subsumed as the concept ‘trauma’ as theorized by Western thinkers. (11) In their book *Testimony* (1992), Shoshana Felman and Dori Laub distance themselves from

Caruth's all-encompassing definition of trauma that could serve as the link between cultures, noting that texts on trauma "that testify do not simply report facts but, in a different way, encounter—and make us encounter—strangeness" (7). Trauma then cannot be reduced to a singular and categorical concept—its "strangeness . . . cannot be easily domesticated" (Buelens, Durrant and Eaglestone 3).

If, as Caruth suggests, trauma resides "solely in the structure of its experience or reception: the event is not assimilated or experienced fully at the time, but only belatedly, in its repeated possession of the one who experiences it," it is then imperative that the affects generated (by perpetrator and/or survivor) be examined with the utmost of care (4). Dominick LaCapra too identifies experience as fundamental in trauma studies, noting that as "experience seems even to function as a residual concept—what remains or is left over when meaning and language do not exhaust their objects"—the affects that arise from or as a response to the traumatic event be keenly considered, especially in cases where perpetrators and victims are unwilling or even unable to use language to represent the trauma (*History in Transit* 39). It is here that Ananya Jahanara Kabir issues:

"[a] challenge to those. . . interested in the 'future of trauma theory' [which] is to find ways of analysing these traumas that acknowledge the myriad modes of consolation, memorializing and reconciliation which are deployed by traumatized subjects who may never have heard of Sigmund Freud, psychoanalysis and, indeed 'trauma theory'. (63-64)

Kabir acknowledges that she herself "struggl[es] with what we may term (cautiously) a 'Holocaust-centric' apparatus grounded in a Euro-American experiential space" (64). This apparatus, or theoretical framework, is, she admits, "indispensab[le]: analysis has to start

from somewhere, and it cannot ignore the presence of an existing, sophisticated set of theoretical approaches” (64).

While this dissertation too admits to utilising and employing these “existing, sophisticated set of theoretical approaches” to analyse the primary texts, there has to be a disagreement with Kabir when she asserts that “[f]ar more productive, then, is to develop a non-Eurocentric trauma theory that can revivify existing paradigms for explicating the work of trauma,” as if there can be a theory untouched by Western thought and conceptualisation (73). This focus on developing a new “sophisticated set of theoretical approaches” that above all, must be categorically “non-Eurocentric” is untenable, especially in this globalised world where discourses, commerce, and especially traumatic events (stemming from terrorist attacks and the influx of refugees due to on-going civil war, to list just two examples) circulate freely and indiscriminately. What is needed is an acknowledgement that, when using such Western theoretical frameworks to read and work through the texts on trauma, the critical analysis is always going to come up against the limits of geographical, temporal and cultural gaps, and to take care that the limitations are not circumvented by reducing trauma to a singular categorical concept (following Caruth) or by finding recourse only to the specific discourses that directly pertain to the traumatic event or work of trauma itself (following Kabir).

The term “Southeast Asian film” will not be used to describe the primary texts because the film authorship and financing arrangements of the texts do not lend themselves easily (if at all) to such an encompassing term (with regards to geography and culture). Rithy Panh is a Cambodian filmmaker who suffered under the Khmer Rouge and later escaped in 1980 to France, where he learnt and developed his filmmaking craft at the Institut des hautes études ciné-matographiques (IDHEC) in Paris. His films are extensively funded and co-produced by French entities (such as du Centre National de la Cinematographie, du FACCID,

ARTE France, Institut national de l'audiovisuel, and France Televisions). Rithy Panh's films then "represent a transnational Cambodian cinema" (Ly 53). Of Jewish descent, Joshua Oppenheimer was born in Texas and educated in London at the Central Saint Martins College of Art and Design. His films, centred as they are on Indonesian subjects, are little-funded (if at all) by Indonesian entities but rather are heavily dependent on financing (just like Panh's films) from foreign entities (like the Danish Film Institute, Nordisk Film & TV Fond, The Finnish Film Foundation, and Sundance Institute of Expression Foundation). Oppenheimer's films technically cannot be ever considered as Indonesian Cinema as the films were never submitted to the Censorship Board of Indonesia. *The Act of Killing* and *The Look of Silence* were never released in Indonesian cinema spaces "in the normal way, because to do so you have to submit the film to the censorship board, which could provoke a ban—and [Oppenheimer and his film crew] knew that if a film's banned, it becomes a crime to watch it at all" ("Absent Victims"). This "normal way" mentioned refers to "a pre-censorship stage which require[s] producers to submit their scripts to the Censorship Board even before shooting [takes] place" (Paramaditha 71). Oppenheimer's films would surely have run afoul of SARA (short for *Suku, Agama, Ras, and Antar Golongan*—ethnicity, religion, race, and class), a law which "stipulate[s] that films should not touch on issues that might provoke conflicts in relation to the four [aforementioned] subjects that have been codified by the New Order regime" (Paramaditha 71) and which still remains "widespread [as] SARA sentiment [has left] Indonesia's young and fragile democracy vulnerable to identity politics, which were exploited in the 2012 Jakarta election[,] the 2014 presidential election," and most recently in 2016 with the prosecution of former Jakarta governor "Basuki 'Ahok' Tjahaja Purnama for religious defamation" ("Q&A: Is Indonesia at stake in Nov. 4 anti-Ahok rally?").

It is here that the term "dependent cinema" may be useful in elucidating the problematics of transnationalism as it pertains to the primary texts of this dissertation,

wherein their “production process [is] dependent . . . on transnational capital” such as “festival-connected structures of funding” (Ingawanij 11). Following May Adadol Ingawanij questioning of “the productivity, effects, and contradictions engendered here by the encounter between the local and the transnational” (1) this dissertation asks after the *possibility* generated in the very *encounter* between the spectator and the filmic text, wherein “cinema implies the possibility of iterating *alternative* public spheres, and does so even (or especially) in places characterized by the absence or malfunction of institutionalized civil society” (9). Oppenheimer’s observation that in Indonesia, up to April 2013, “there had been 500 screenings in 95 cities, averaging in size of about 200 people. So although underground, a lot of them are big—some of them have been 700 people” (“Joshua Oppenheimer on 'The Act of Killing'”) finds correspondence with Ingawanij’s postulation of:

Cinema’s promise [as] a radically different future—in other words, cinema as the public space for rehearsing desired futures, disinterring forgotten ones, and for projecting social collectivities to come—[one that] no doubt plays a large part in energizing the present organization of film screening and filmmaking events by independent groups¹ in Southeast Asia. (9)

This “promise,” shared by Ingawanij (in her scholarly writings), and Oppenheimer and Panh (in their essay films) is also enacted through “circulat[ing] their works in the international ‘-scape’ of global film culture rather than in the cinemas of the home countries[,] . . . they withdraw to a sphere where they are not bound by the regulations of their respective nation states” (Baumgärtel 25). If, following Tilman Baumgärtel’s claim that “[t]he cinema of Southeast Asia has been a *quantité négligeable* internationally until very recently, despite the fact that this part of the world has been positively cinema-crazy for decades” (1), “the

¹ For example, *The Act of Killing* was screened “[a]t two secret screenings last December and February, . . . to members of a local film club. Some were too afraid to even watch it, while others

visibility of film festivals and their communitarian air . . . conducive to registering the possibility of collective recognition of marginalized groups, and to performing democratic discursive exchange in the ‘liminal’ space of civic inclusiveness” (Ingawanij 9) is all the more significant, especially for films that “make their way home” due to the increased spotlight and accolades² heaped on them after travelling on the international film festival circuit. Other than the primary texts of this dissertation, a prime example of this “homecoming” would be *Exile* (2016), Panh’s film on the forced displacement of much of Cambodia’s population due to the Khmer Rouge regime, which headlined the seventh edition of Cambodia’s international film festival³ in March 2017 after its 2016 debut at the Cannes Film Festival. Baumgärtel’s observation that “[m]any of the films from Southeast Asia that are screened at international film festivals and even receive awards there, are not particularly successful in their respective countries, if they are released theatrically at all” speaks then to the importance of the transnational nature of this dissertation’s primary texts, which interrogate, are made in, and later screened in, the repressive countries of Indonesia and Cambodia (22).

The significant point that this dissertation stresses is that these primary texts are essay films first and foremost, with the recognition that the film crews are primarily comprised of Cambodians for Panh’s films and Indonesians (majority of whom are listed as ‘Anonymous’)

² Panh’s films have been mainstays on the international film festival circuit, with the director being recognised at the Cannes Film Festival during the early stages of his career for his third feature film, *Rice People* (*Neak Sre*, 1994), in 1994. In subsequent years, he has won the Francois Chalais Prize (Prix François Chalais) in 2003 for *S21* and the Prix Un Certain Regard in 2013 for *The Missing Picture*. Oppenheimer’s *The Act of Killing* (2012) was recognized at the Berlin International Film Festival and won the Prize of the Ecumenical Jury and Panorama Audience Award in 2013. *The Act of Killing* was also recognized at two key commercial filmmaking awards ceremonies in 2014: The Academy Awards in USA and the BAFTA Awards in the United Kingdom. His follow-up feature documentary, *The Look of Silence* (2014) was nominated for the Golden Lion at the Venice Film Festival in 2014, and won the FIPRESCI Prize and the Grand Special Jury Prize at the same festival.

³ <http://www.phnompenhpost.com/lifestyle/rithy-panhs-exile-headline-cambodias-international-film-fest>

for Oppenheimer's films. The essayistic mode of spectatorship that these films offer to, provoke, or implicate spectators in is not bound by geographical categories but rather, situated in the very cinematic encounter between the films and the spectator. There is then a need to define just what *are* essay films.

In the "Points of Origin" preface before the "Introduction" proper of his book on the essay film, David Montero ruminates on two other prefaces, the first of which "sparked [his] interest in the essay film," namely that of Chris Marker's *Sans soleil* [*Sunless*, 1982]. The female narrator of *Sans soleil* reflects upon the difficulties "he" told "her" in him being unable to link together an image he found compelling with others, "One day I'll have to put it all alone at the beginning of a film with a long piece of black leader ... If they don't see happiness in the picture, at least they will see the black." Embedded in *Sans soleil*'s preface for Montero is the implicit address towards an embodied spectator, a member of the "'they,' one of the many who at some point watched or are going to watch the film; another member of the usually silent, invisible crowd, somehow invited here to the private dialogue between the unnamed 'he' and 'she'" (Montero ix-x). Montero traces this discursive impulse to the French writer Michel de Montaigne wherein he too addresses an embodied reader in the preface to his *Essais* [*Essays*, 1580], "Reader, thou hast here an honest book" (qtd. in Montero x). Similar to how Montero felt he was a part of the "they" that were addressed in *Sans soleil*, Montaigne's preface "provoke[s] the same feeling of being noticed and placed in a position where it is impossible to act as if you are not there, *reading*" (Montero xi).

Both prefaces not only address an embodied "other" but also downplay their authority in favour of a more "honest, imaginative and inquisitive" treatment of their examined subjects (Montero x). The difficulties that *Sans soleil*'s "he" faced in linking together images finds correspondence with Montaigne's forthright admission that "[m]y defects are therein to be read to the life, and my imperfections and my natural form, so far as public reverence hath

permitted me” (qtd. in Montero x). “[E]xpressed with the forthright, down-to-earth almost self-deprecating tone behind . . . a mysterious source of self-confidence,” the essay (in its literary and cinematic form) is not only a meditation of its themes but also of the epistemological means by which it examines them, opening an avenue for the reader/spectator so that “they” can receive and respond critically to the text.

For Montero, it is in “relation to a constellation of cultural, social and political discourses” (4) that the essay “creates the conditions under which knowledge is sought in a rather dialogical manner” (9). With the essay’s epistemological foundations thus being built on ever-shifting and fluid grounds, Montero complicates its ontological base as well with his assertion that “[t]he essay is then not so much a genre as a form and an attitude” (4). Dialogism (following Mikhail Bakhtin) “emphasiz[es] the way in which the struggle for meaning is staged in an essay” (Montero 8) through its competing discourses that alternately correspond or disagree with each other and this directly impacts upon the essay’s form as “fragmentary” and “inconclusive” as “its search for a truth [is] shaped by the contingency of the historical” (Montero 9). Montero claims then that his linkage of essay films with “dialogic theory underlines the way in which utterances project themselves towards their interlocutor in an attempt to reach ‘active understanding[;]’” meaning-making is not solely the purview of an authorial text that strives to impose an uncontested and monological meaning on interpellated spectators but rather a self-reflexive, pensive and dialogic text that addresses and seeks the “[i]nvolvement” of embodied spectators who are able to think critically alongside the film they are watching (46). Through his examination of European filmmakers such as Marker, Harun Farocki, and José Luis Guerín, Montero frames the essay film as a form which strives to move beyond monological meaning-making through dialogical means, wherein not only the critical treatment of its subjects and themes but also the subjectivities that purportedly anchor the text are examined and challenged by involved

embodied spectators. As a result, “[e]ssayistic knowledge would, therefore, appear not only as relational and dialogical, but also as necessarily tentative, inconclusive, and always open to further debate or, to use a Bakhtinian term, ‘unfinalizable’” (Montero 16).

Timothy Corrigan too identifies as a key component of the essay film the positioning of the spectator, wherein s/he

inhabits partially the unstable subject position foregrounded in the film itself and partially the expanding position of participating in other ideas and worlds . . . Not only does that subject become made and remade through the pressure of the resistant reality of the film but also the lack of a single, dominant, or sometimes even coherent discourse disperses that viewing subject through its pastiche of forms, its mix and subversion of generic structures, and its cannibalization of narrative teleologies. (35)

Similar to how Montero takes inspiration from a noted literary figure (Montaigne) to help him define the essay film genre, so too does Corrigan think through Walter Benjamin’s notion of historical testimony, wherein the “essayistic agency” of the spectator serves to differentiate “between witnessing events and recognizing events where the act of recognition is both a rescue and an expectation that reframes the act of witnessing” (Corrigan 175). Essay films charge spectators with the responsibility to “attempt to reach ‘active understanding’” which will actualise their essayistic impulse (Montero 46). Laura Rascaroli goes even further and postulates that the essay film implicates them into a system of active spectatorship: “The ‘I’ of the essay film always clearly and strongly implicates a ‘you’ . . . [who] is called upon to participate and share the enunciator’s reflections . . . [T]his ‘you’ is not a generic audience, but an embodied spectator” (34).

If the essay film is, as Montero suggests, “unfinalizable,” what sort of end goal does it have? To what end is this active and critical spectatorship (generated through the cinematic encounter with the essay film) geared towards achieving? It is worth teasing out the

implication of the appellative “essay” in the essay film genre. To “essay” is “[t]o attempt; to try to do, . . . to undertake” something, a necessarily subjective endeavour (“essay, v.” *OED Online*). Vivian Sobchack spells out the implications of this method of essayistic film engagement: “As viewers, we are finally left to our own devices; we must see and make judgement for ourselves” (80).

Who are the “subjects . . . called to participate in the event[s]” the films represent (Pavsek 7)? S/he is a “spectator” who possesses the necessary critical stance that would enable one to actively participate and respond to Christopher Pavsek’s notion of the “event of cinema,” one who is not “another member of the usually silent, invisible crowd” that is interpellated by the film (according to Apparatus Theory⁴) but is instead an active, embodied spectator who is receptive and responsive to the challenges projected by the cinema (Montero ix-x). The epigraph at the beginning of this prospectus thus serves as a framing device in which “[e]xperience . . . as a residual concept” overflows as a form of cinematic excess and is directed towards an embodied spectator who will respond to its affective charges (LaCapra 39). Following Pavsek, this dissertation seeks to examine the claim that “the means for resolving the insufficiency of the present [could] lie at hand . . . perhaps not ready-at-hand, but nonetheless available, if only we might find them” within the cinema (241). The concept of failure then is central to this study of the primary texts— in relation to Christopher Pavsek’s claim that “the history of cinema must be understood not as the history of its grand achievements, but rather as the history of unrealized possibilities, thwarted ambitions, and disappointed hopes” (1), cinema then must be understood not as the mechanical god which bestows answers through the presence of what is projected onscreen but rather a filmic mirror

⁴ Robert Stam explains Apparatus Theory’s subjugation of the spectator: “The shadowy images on the screen, the darkness of the movie theatre, the passive immobility of the spectator, the womb-like sealing off of ambient noises and quotidian pressures” help create the ideal environment for “extremely strong visual and auditory stimuli [to] inundate us at a moment when we are predisposed toward passive reception and narcissistic self-absorption” (162-63).

of humanity that enables us to perceive the failures, ruptures and absences both onscreen and in our own lives.

Primer

Magic, recognized everywhere as the devil's part, enjoys an incomprehensible tolerance in poetry. Revenge is gotten on wickedness by producing its caricature, which is to take from it its reality without annihilating it; evil powers are conjured by filling the world with idols which have mouths but do not speak.

Emmanuel Levinas (*Reality and Its Shadow* 12)

“Of course I haven't found the missing picture. I looked for it, in vain . . . This missing picture, I now hand over to you so that it never ceases to seek us out.”

Narrator (*The Missing Picture*)

Before this dissertation engages with the four primary texts, there is a need to briefly inquire into the major thematic concerns of representation and failure that these texts essay by working through and with Panh's *The Missing Picture* (*L'image manquante*, 2013) as a primer to the discussion proper of the primary texts.

The Missing Picture—the first Cambodian film nominated for the Academy Award in the “Foreign Language Film” category—is a continuation of Panh's essayistic examination of the brutality and ramifications of the Khmer Rouge regime in Cambodia. Unlike *S21* (2003) or *Duch, Master of the Forges of Hell* (2011), which utilised interviews supplemented with re-enactments drawn from the “bodily memor[ies]” (Oppenheimer 244) of S21's prison guards, the dismal conditions of Khmer Rouge era Cambodia are recreated in this essay film by juxtaposing and blending together archival footage of Khmer Rouge propaganda with clay figurine dioramas that depict key episodes of Panh's life.

Absent the victims (or their images, as captured by photography or film), dioramas, defined as “small-scale representation[s] of a scene, etc., in which three-dimensional figures or objects are displayed in front of a painted background,” stand in for the victims who have been murdered and silenced (“diorama, n.” *OED Online*). After the initial production company logo is screened, the film proper opens with a fade-in shot of a shabby room that houses a large collection of old film reels. The next sequence, which fades in from a shot of the room with the film reels, is of an unidentified person pulling a strip of film downwards. The spectator is just able to make out the contents of the reel, which is that of four dancers in elaborate costumes (Figure 1).

Figure 1. An unidentified man looks at a strip of film reel.

The next sequence, which features no gradual fade in but is of a rather abrupt cut, is that of a medium shot of a dancer (who bears a resemblance to one of the four aforementioned dancers), her every gesture rendered in slow-motion. It then fades to black and yellow text bearing the French title of the film *L'image manquante* appears, signalling the end of the introductory portion of the film. In showing (rather than obscuring) the old film reels and a

film strip that is visibly “animated” by an onscreen human agent, Panh makes a point to reveal the “magic” of the cinema—its ability to cut across disparate temporal and spatial regions—by showing the spectator that the dancer (in the medium shot) springs forth from the earlier shot of the “moving” film strip only through the cinematic technique of montage. Why does Panh guard against the “magic” of cinema, its ability to seduce spectators into believing wholesale the images and sounds projected onscreen, right at the outset of his own cinematic work?

It is useful to recall here that Emmanuel Levinas “invokes this singular term magic” when he discusses “[t]he exceptional structure of aesthetic existence” in “Reality and Its Shadow” (3). For Levinas, “art, essentially disengaged, constitutes, in a world of initiative and responsibility, a dimension of evasion” (12), an evasion that seems to locate itself in the film’s opening monologue, wherein Panh admits that he would “like to get rid of” the memory of his childhood, a memory that “pounding at [his] temples” (*The Missing Picture*). The dialectical tension generated between Khmer Rouge propaganda and the clay dioramas necessitates that the introductory portion of the film work to undercut cinema’s “magic,” its claim to represent reality in totality and the means by which it interpellates spectators; in so doing, Panh hopes that the spectator will learn (as he did) through the cinematic apparatus that “the revolution [the Khmer Rouge] so promised us . . . exists only on film” and that this essayistic impulse, this critical mode of spectatorship, must be a fundamental element of the cinematic encounter between film and spectator (*The Missing Picture*).

Blurred outlines of female dancers feature in the next sequence. As they dance, the narrator muses: “I seek my childhood like a lost picture, or rather, it seeks me . . . I’ve seen troubled times when fear alternates with hope[.] The memory is there, now, pounding at my temples.” There is then an abrupt cut to a close-up of a pair of hands carving a figurine (Figure 2).

Figure 2. An unidentified person carves a figurine.

The narrator continues “[w]ith clay and with water, with the dead, with rice fields, with living hands, a man is made.” Other than the “rice fields,” the film has featured the image(s) of “clay,” “water,” “living hands,” as well as the memory of the “dead” (ostensibly rendered through the blurred outlines of the dancers). There is a dialectic established at the outset which points to the differing scopes/ambitions of the “official” propaganda, which projects the grandiosity of the Khmer Rouge agrarian revolution by marshalling huge human resources, and the “subjective” dioramas, which rely mainly on clay figurines to represent the harsh, brutal reality of life in Year Zero of the revolution.

That Panh highlights the shared constructed and asymmetrical nature of Khmer Rouge propaganda footage and the dioramas presented in his film—which place the silenced victims entirely at the mercy of monological archivers—hints at other similarities between the two disparate modes of representing the Khmer Rouge era and can be read as an indictment of the film’s inability to escape (or at least distance itself) from the epistemological violence engendered by the propaganda films. This epistemological violence threatens to shift into a

more sinister realm in the end credits, when two boxes containing messily-scattered figurines seem to call up images, if not of real mass graves, then of the dioramic displays of death in the film itself (Figure 3). Recalling Levinas' admonition that the magic of art stems from "idols which have mouths but do not speak" (12), Panh here gestures towards the very inability or even failure of his film's endeavour, which is an invocation to give life, to animate, his figurines with speech, wants, desires, and fears (through camera movement and voice-overs "attributed" to the figurines) in an effort to make manifest the "missing pictures" of life under the brutal thumb of the Khmer Rouge regime.

Figure 3. Boxes of figurines are depicted in the end credit sequence of the film.

Referring back to the first significant filmic gesture of the film (that of undercutting cinema's claim to represent and/or contain reality), Panh implores the spectator to look charitably upon his (failed) essayistic endeavours vis-à-vis the Khmer Rouge propaganda machine. Panh does not set out to present a carefully-curated and constructed film that would trump the Khmer Rouge propaganda and assert itself as *the* official historical record of the horrors of the era. Instead, he discloses from the outset the medium, means, and tools that he will work with. If

the Khmer Rouge propaganda was aimed at not only a domestic populace but also an international audience that needed to believe in the revolution, such as “in Paris, [where] Pol Pot signed his articles “Original Khmer,” Panh then works against such grandiose themes and set pieces of a regime in the throes of revolutionary fervour. Panh wants to focus on the mundane, the quotidian, the “old days in Phnom Penh . . . laughter and singing” as well as the hardships endured by his family, which was itself unexceptional to the brutality suffered by countless other families. Panh starts off this oppositional mode of aesthetics and themes by having the narrator explicitly name the first fully-painted figurine, whose “suit is white, his tie is dark,” as that which represents Panh’s father who he “wants to hold . . . close.” Already a personal and subjective story, Panh uses the story of his family’s suffering as the initial narrative device to counter the Khmer Rouge propaganda, in the guise of the search for “[t]he missing picture: That’s us” (*The Missing Picture*).

With reference to the film’s title, what Panh seeks is never explicitly made out in the film; rather, it remains opaque and missing. His confession at the end of the film that he “looked for it, in vain” (*The Missing Picture*) marks the film as a failure but the continued absence of the “missing picture” can also be read as having the potentiality to provide for the embodied spectator an impulse to critically receive and process the film. The narrator in *The Missing Picture*’s trailer elucidates this line of thinking wherein “[w]hat [Panh] give[s] . . . is neither the picture nor the search for a unique image, but the picture of a quest: the quest that cinema allows.” This ‘quest’ (whether to attain social justice for the victims, retributive justice against the perpetrators of the genocide) is not resolved within either the narrative of the film or its film bodies that are ultimately untenable as clay substitutes for the (absent) corporeal victims of the Khmer Rouge. Indeed, the quest to recover it is questioned by Panh himself as he wonders what difference it would make to the suffering experienced by the victims of the Khmer Rouge. And yet, it is this very absence of a resolution that allows for

the burden of the ‘quest’ to be conferred on the embodied spectator, the point at which critical spectatorship can take root in the cinematic encounter between the spectator and the film.

By escaping the operation of representation, which would make the “missing picture(s)” manifest, meaning-making in the film then could potentially subvert any attempt at assimilation, whether by the economy of capitalism, which would necessarily co-opt it into a commodity to serve the commercial imperative or the economy of knowledge, which would necessarily seek to codify and subsume it into a conclusive set of knowledge systems, systems that, in short, interpellate the spectator and close off the cinematic encounter between film and the embodied critical spectator because the essayistic impulse dies off (if it ever were present) at the film’s resolution. Ethical spectatorship is at stake here and a crucial element of its (possible) gestation is the absences that rupture the film’s claim to complete and resolve the issues at hand. The dissertation turns now to extended studies of the primary texts that share in and expand on the problematics that *The Missing Picture* raises in its cinematic encounter with the embodied spectator.

Chapter One

Get the Picture?: Absence and Excess in the S21 Archive

I’m trying to understand what happened, to make sense out of it.

I want to understand it.

Vann Nath, *S21: The Khmer Rouge Killing Machine*

S21: THE KHMER ROUGE KILLING MACHINE

Focusing on the traumas borne from Pol Pot's Khmer Rouge regime (1975 – 1979), Rithy Panh's *S21: The Khmer Rouge Killing Machine* (2003) draws attention to the atrocities of the regime with accounts from two survivors of the infamous S21 prison and several of their former jailers. They are brought back to the prison to testify to the atrocities committed within its confines and the surrounding "killing fields" (Boyle 95). During these four years, the country was convulsed by a series of purges, wherein an estimated "two million people, roughly a quarter of the Cambodian population, were systematically destroyed by means of starvation, overwork, torture, and execution" (Boyle 95). The S21 prison, "where an estimated 17,000 Cambodians—men, women, and children—were interrogated, tortured, and executed," is a relatively innocuous-looking structure, having originally been a "high school" called "Tuol Sleng" before the Khmer Rouge came to power (Boyle 96). A year after the Khmer Rouge regime ended, the premises of Tuol Sleng were converted into a Genocide Museum, housing remnants of the physical manifestations of torture and trauma under Pol Pot's rule, and forming a part of Cambodia's archives on S21.

Similar to this, Panh's *S21: The Khmer Rouge Killing Machine* functions as an extension of the physicality of S21 as a locale for the trauma experienced by Cambodians under Pol Pot. In this, the film provides an anecdotal companion piece; in which film bodies function as supplements to the images that potentially trigger if not, influence the reception of memories of the spectator. Following a montage sequence of images of destruction captioned as footage from Pol Pot's regime, we are introduced to Vann Nath, survivor of S21 and the protagonist of the film, not through an image of him or his voice, but rather a shot of his disembodied hand completing the finishing touches on an artwork that depicts the initial terror experienced by new prisoners of S21 (Figure 4).

Figure 4. The hand of Vann Nath, survivor of S21 painting in the finish touches of an art piece that portrays the trepidation and horror of the prisoners when they first enter the prison.

As the camera pans back and forth between his face and the painting he is working on, Vann Nath recounts how he was arrested without justification and tortured for a week before being transferred to S21, which led him to think: “This is the end. My life’s over” (*S21*). Vann Nath’s paintings feature prominently in the film, as evidence of the atrocities committed within the halls of S21, becoming an indispensable part of the Regime’s archives that were both a source of pride (then) and reminder of the Khmer Rouge’s atrocities and in turn infamy today. During his imprisonment in S21, Vann Nath painted the portraits of the Khmer Rouge elite, such as Pol Pot. He took care that his “strokes were gentle, not abrupt, which would mean disrespect. [Vann Nath] had to have respect, do light strokes, and . . . paint the face . . . as lovely as the skin of a young virgin . . . [which] would make [the Khmer Rouge elite] happy [enough to] . . . take the painting” (*S21*). Vann Nath’s skill in painting—his careful, if not tender depictions of the Regime’s leaders and ironically, the scenes of torture—was the sole reason he was spared from execution.

Image-making (and the representation of images) is thus central to the film, not only literally (as in paintings, pictures or photographs) but also textually, as in documents or “pictures, understood as complex assemblages of virtual, material, and symbolic elements . . . in which ‘a state of affairs’ . . . is projected” (Mitchell xiii-xiv). In an interview, Panh describes how Vann Nath showed Hoi, a former prison guard, “all the paintings that he’d made for the museum⁵” (Oppenheimer 243). At each painting, Vann Nath questioned Hoi on the veracity of each painting – whether the depicted scenes were “true or not [as] Vann Nath had not seen the events that he was depicting in the painting but . . . had been told about them” (243-44). Deirdre Boyle asserts with conviction that Vann Nath’s “images fill in the missing pictures of what happened in S-21 and are essential documents of genocide” (101), in essence, demonstrating the need for an ‘external’ source to complete S21’s history. This need (or lack due to its absence) then brings to mind a crucial question relating to the image-making vis-à-vis the position held or once held by image creator: *Is “there is no getting beyond pictures, much less world pictures, to a more authentic relationship with Being, with the Real, or with the World”* (Mitchell xiv)? Boyle’s privileging of victim’s testimony over perpetrator’s testimony, or rather, the privileging of presence (of “evidence”) over absence finds accord with Mitchell’s claim that “In its most extended sense, then, a picture refers to the entire situation in which an image has made its appearance, as when we ask someone if they ‘get the picture’” (xiv).

What then, to make of the fact that the Khmer Rouge was obsessive over their image-making, literally shedding blood to fill up the archives with photographs and confessions of the (alleged) enemies of “Angkar, the Party” (S21)? As a former prison guard recites mechanically,

⁵ The S21 prison was converted into the “Tuol Sleng Genocide Museum in 1980” (Boyle 101).

In Democratic Kampuchea, Angkar's line was to govern justly. When you make a revolution, you want justice for the people. And if you arrest someone, you need a reason. Angkar has eyes everywhere, it makes no mistakes, it arrests rightfully. (S21)

The inhumane absurdity of Khmer Rouge logic vis-à-vis justice and image-making is laid bare when Vann Nath questions them on the coerced confession of Nay Nan, a self-taught “doctor” imprisoned at S21 for espionage. Subjected to the “strong-arm tactics” of the prison guards and interrogators, Nan eventually breaks and makes her confession. The guard in charge of her interrogation recalls his dismay upon “[r]eading it, [as he] didn’t know what network was involved, what party. It contained nothing” (S21). Here then is a document devoid of its symbolic content, an image upon which the Khmer Rouge depends to “project” a “state of affairs” that legitimizes its brutal treatment of its citizens and yet lacks the prerequisites that necessitate punishing the offender. The guard resorts to “explain[ing] and suggest[ing]” how she should write the confession in order to meet the necessary conditions that justify her current imprisonment and torture. The guard morbidly frames this “suggestion” of his as a collaborative effort, noting that, “In the end, we managed to write up this document,” a document in which he supplied the organizations she purportedly spied for (CIA, KGB, and the Vietnamese enemy) as well as literally writing and “embellish[ing]” on her behalf as “[s]he hadn’t gone to school” (S21).

Panh’s distrust of the image and its representational power (as truth, as justification for the brutal conditions of imprisonment) shows through in the film when the camera lingers over a photograph of what is purportedly Nan (her dog tag is rendered illegible in the photograph, there are no signifiers, textual or otherwise, to *prove* that “she” is indeed Nan) even though Vann Nath is now referring to her confession: “Here’s the document” (Figure 5).

Figure 5. Vann Nath providing the picture of Nay Nan, a self-taught “doctor” imprisoned at S21 for espionage. In this scene, Vann Nath uses the photograph as a visual tool to recount Nay Nan’s confession at S21 during her time there.

His description does not readily link together the image (the document-image) and its signifier (“Here’s the document”). The resultant dissonances stemming from the sensorial (the spoken word does not match up with the image onscreen) and empirical (doubts over the veracity of the documents that are the photo and the confession) jar the spectator and guards against the interpellating effect that the “roundtable talking heads” documentary mode induces vis-à-vis notions of (documentary) authenticity and authority.

Even when the document is placed prominently in the centre of the frame, her image still haunts the screen; “she” looks out through the screen and at the spectator (Figure 6). In this, it brings the questions: Why? To what end? How do we respond to such an (ambiguous) image that haunts the frame at the very instance that the veracity of the various images onscreen are taken (for granted? Uncritically?) to be true?

Figure 6. The image continues to stare back even when it is not placed prominently in the frame any more.

In writing of the unreliability of images and their meaning-making operation, there is still no recourse to truth/fact *other* than the images (and their symbolic projections) presented on screen, fallible or no. Indeed, if we are resigned to accepting Mitchell's notion that "[p]ictures are our way of gaining access to whatever these things [with Being, with the Real, or with the World] are," then it is even more vital that we are attentive to "ways of worldmaking . . . a poetics of pictures" that enables us to ask after these images—"not just what they mean or do but what they want"—to animate and imbue them with agency in order to better understand just what *we* ask of them (xiv-xv).

With relation to Boyle's idolizing of Vann Nath's paintings as undisputed truth of the horrors endured by the prisoners of S21, this mode of testifying—relying solely on the (unverified) testimony of either victim or perpetrator—troubles Panh profoundly. He contends that "the testimony [is] not complete unless it [is] a testimony from both sides of the situation" (Oppenheimer 244). For the perpetrators of the suffering in S21, it is through

reenactment that they will attempt to testify to their crimes – harnessing the body and its physicality in order to effectively, if not adequately depict the narratives of their past transgressions. Panh describes how language failed to represent adequately the experiences of Paul, a former prison guard: “I understood that this man wanted very much to explain what he had done at S21. But he couldn’t get round to explaining it properly, all his phrases were cut off” (244), suggesting notions of potential hesitation (wilful or otherwise) in the act of recollection. More significantly, Paul’s failure to adequately narrate his actions at S21 towards the prisoners leads to Panh “discover[ing] that there was another memory, which is the bodily memory” (244). With this initial observation that Paul’s “gestures . . . completed the phrases he couldn’t discuss,” Panh sets out to uncover the “bodily memories” of the former prison guards featured in *S21*, memories rooted in “violence . . . so strong that words don’t suffice to describe” adequately their depraved conduct in the prison (244).

Though these “bodily memories” have been put on display, they are nevertheless marked by the absences they generate: the embodied absences of the dead victims. In one remarkable scene, Khieu Ches, a former prison guard, reenacts his nightly routine in S21 without missing a beat. Previously a reserved figure hovering at the margins of the frame, Khieu Ches now barks out commands with authority, “Stand here! Stand there! Be quiet! Don’t make any noise! Otherwise, it’s the club!” (*S21*). He escorts the prisoners to a prison cell, unchains their handcuffs and leg irons from them, warns them to be silent, beats them when his orders are disobeyed, distributes and confiscates rations depending on their compliance, and fetches a vessel for them to relieve themselves, all the while causing a racket that punctures the still of the night. However, in this unnerving sequence, the sole person who breaks the “quiet” of the night and “make[s] any noise” is Khieu Ches. Aside from the former prison guard, no one else is present in this sequence (excepting of course, the offscreen film crew recording him). Absence here in this sequence is made manifest and amplified by the

presence of the sole corporeal body onscreen (Khieu Ches). Though the prisoners are entirely absent here, they are invoked through his bodily gestures and punitive commands that are directly addressed towards them, an embodied absence that calls the spectator to recognise just such an absence. It is then not only the failure of language (on the guards' part) but also the failure to represent these victims visually (on the film's part, with "aid" from the guards' bodily gestures) that opens up the potentiality for film ethics and engaged critical spectatorship, as the spectator—perhaps previously caught in the grip of the morbid spectacle that the reenactment of a prison guard terrorizing prisoners promises—resists interpellation due to the pronounced absence of the victims to which the whole reenactment sequence ostensibly revolves around.

Panh affirms this notion of embodied absence when he details why the camera does not follow a former prison guard into a cell during a reenactment sequence of his night duties:

“[I]t was instinctive to stop, to hold the camera at the door, not to follow in.

Otherwise we'd be walking over the prisoners, if you like. . . . This is something I realized after shooting. I instinctively didn't walk over the prisoners. If I had done, 'who would I be?'" (Oppenheimer 245)

Throughout *S21*, the reenactments cannot but fail to provide the missing part of the testimony that Panh feels is necessary in order for it to be “complete” because the reenactments call attention to the absent representations of the victims. Reenactment fails to adequately represent—it cannot ever sufficiently address the suffering and trauma borne by the survivors and victims of the Khmer Rouge massacres. Neither can the image or in this instance, physical bodies that serve as depictions of suffering, whether produced by victim or perpetrator, serve as adequate representation. Absent an easy solution, it is tempting to follow the mechanical routine of the perpetrators by shirking off all responsibility and placing the

blame on Angkar, the repressive state apparatus, to “cleanse [Cambodia] of evil” and trauma through a refusal to take responsibility for actions carried out, through (willful) historical amnesia or simply through “get[ting] drunk, com[ing] home, [and going to] sleep,” as what one guard does whenever he thinks about his actions committed as a S21 prison guard (*S21*). Vann Nath, the moral centre of the film (suffused as it is with perpetrators and archives of the Khmer Rouge’s special blend of bureaucratic depravity), immediately refutes these approaches,

For me, it's not like that. For me, each of our meetings is very painful. I don't really want to come to these meetings, because we're not here to tell pleasant stories. We only talk about this unbearable past, which we can't escape. I can't, anyway. I'm trying to understand what happened, to make sense out of it. I want to understand it. (*S21*)

Panh too outlines the importance of remembering the Khmer Rouge genocide, of searching always for a means in which to understand the atrocities committed by a Party that rendered individual human life as (potential) archival material to bolster its legitimacy, not just as a gesture of respect for the victims and survivors, but also for the benefit of future generations:

“Not many Cambodians tell their children about the genocide, which is a fuzzy corner of their memory. But we can't build our future by forgetting. The survivors must tell their stories and ensure that the memory of what happened is handed down from the past to the present. We owe a debt to the dead and we have an obligation to our children. We shan't be able to get rid of this 30-year culture of violence, cast out the monster that is fear and put behind us the collective guilt we feel as survivors unless we manage to *understand* our history.” (32, emphasis added)

Rather than trying to ensure the “complet[ion]” of a definitive “testimony” of the genocide through reenactment, *S21* seeks to use this incompleteness—this failure of representation and testimony—to stress that “the work is never finished because reality itself is always botched up” in post-Khmer Rouge Cambodia (Levinas and Armengaud 36). The ending of *S21* signals that such an incompleteness would be an ethical endeavor. A camera positioned at floor level films Vann Nath as he wordlessly sifts through a pile of refuse and ashes (Figure 7).

Figure 7. Sifting through the ashes, what does Vann Nath hope to find?

What is Vann Nath looking for here? This last scene proceeds without any dialogue and ends with (just like the spectator’s introduction to Vann Nath) his disembodied hand moving about the frame, rendering the act (or even image) of sifting through the “archive” bequeathed by the former masters who ran the S21 prison, all the more pregnant with significance. The credits sequence begins with the text “In memory . . .” (*S21*). In ending with the last “proper” textual signifier (before the roll of credits begin) with ellipses, the film signals to the spectator that—just like Vann Nath’s determined search at the ending proper—the search for

comprehension, the struggle to remember and honour the memory of the victims in spite of the affect of anguish generated (in survivors and Cambodians fortunate to have been born after the reign of terror) must endure . . .

DUCH, MASTER OF THE FORGES OF HELL

It's in Duch's handwriting. A red line. Duch...

Vann Nath, *S21: The Khmer Rouge Killing Machine*

Released 9 years after *S21: The Khmer Rouge Killing Machine*, *Duch, Master of the Forges of Hell* (2011) centres on its eponymous protagonist (real name Kaing Guek Eav), who, “[a]s party secretary . . . commanded this killing machine” known as the S21 prison (*Duch*). The film makes it a point to refer to the incomplete (or even failing) state of the “remaining archives” of S21’s death toll count (Figure 8), questioning from the outset, “[H]ow many others disappeared, ‘crushed and reduced to dust’” (*Duch*)?

Figure 8. From the outset, the film laments the failure of the archives to accurately account for the number of victims who perished at S21.

It is evident then that the Khmer Rouge's relentless need for documentation of every action carried out under its name has also made its presence felt in the two films, released almost a decade apart. This indexical need translates itself through the medium of film as an hour and 42 minutes of ex-S21 commandant Duch speaking to the camera, reminiscing about the glory of the Khmer Rouge, claiming reduced culpability as he was merely a cog in the Khmer Rouge killing machine, and watching his former underlings (the former prison guards featured in *S21*) denounce him and lay all the blame for the atrocities they committed at his feet. Duch's overbearing presence (vis-à-vis his notoriety as well as his screen-time) is interrupted only by archival footage of Khmer Rouge propaganda.

Panh's own relentless need to gather materials (audio-visual, textual and the like) for his archive can be traced back to what he perceives as a failing of the *S21* film, namely Duch's "absence from [the film], which is almost entirely an indictment of the man; everybody accuses him. It was as though [Panh's] investigation was missing an essential element: Duch's words" ("Interview with a Torturer"). Indeed, Duch, whose name is invoked

for the first time in *S21* by Vann Nath when he muses over the fickleness of fate that allowed him to escape Duch's "red line", which indicated on the prison ledgers those marked for death or already executed. Framed then as a companion piece to supplement the lack of Duch in *S21*, Panh sets aside his quest to (help spectators) understand the brutal Khmer Rouge era of Cambodia's history—"I'm not looking for objective truth [when filming Duch]; I just want words. Especially Duch's words. I want him to talk and explain himself" ("Interview with a Torturer"). The Khmer Rouge's "[a]dministrative lunacy" which necessitated that "[t]here must be three copies of every confession; each was about twenty pages long" has now worked against the regime—Panh is now in possession of a trove of "letters, notebooks, sound recordings, archives, distressing statistics . . . [and] Khmer Rouge propaganda films" ("Interview with a Torturer"). The power of images to take hold of the embodied person engaged with them leads Panh to question, when he reads the victims' coerced confessions and wretched, perhaps defiant, prison mug shots, "What do the dead ask? That we think about them? That we liberate them by bringing the guilty to judgment? Or do they want us to understand *what took place*?"

In the film, Duch downplays his role as chief torturer and top security official of the Khmer Rouge regime. He allays charges brought upon him by his own underlings regarding orders that would now be considered crimes against humanity by referring to his own victimhood status, whereby he was pressed into service for the greater good of Cambodia and the Khmer Rouge party. Ironically, this same line of defence is used by his underlings, who portrayed themselves at the very least as "secondary status" victims, to which an incredulous Vann Nath asks, "If you're victims, what does that make the executed prisoners" (*S21*)? To Panh's horror, Duch learns much from his former underlings' arguments and exhortations of reduced culpability; Duch crafts various legal defence arguments from watching footage of *S21* and Panh curses himself for having helped "prepare [Duch] for his trial" ("Interview with

a Torturer”). In giving the former prison guards an avenue to voice protests of their innocence with only Vann Nath as the sole dissenting voice in *S21*, Panh now realizes only too late how treacherous images are; they do not just facilitate discourses of truth but also propagate certain strains of (moral) hypocrisy and evasion of responsibility (Figure 9). If the essay film can be said to, following Rascaroli, implicate the spectator and ask after a critical mode of reception to its discourses and images, here then is an instance when the essay film implicates its creator for his uncritical and non-judicious use of images in his misguided quest to get his film subject to lay bare his darkest secrets.

Figure 9. Duch laughs in derision at a charge levelled at him by his former underling.

As much as Duch’s absent image haunts *S21* and highlights the lacks of an all-encompassing pursuit of truth and justice with the key players of *S21*, so too now do the images being broadcasted of the underlings’ evasion of responsibility (in *S21*) trouble Panh’s attempt to replicate the “bodily memory” strategy of revelation, turning it into “a game of falsehood[, a] cruel game” in which images, the lack thereof and excess of for *S21* and *Duch* respectively

resist Panh's own need to relentlessly document and supplement the indexical value of his archive ("Interview with a Torturer").

The final sequence of *Duch* reinforces the diptych-like structure of Panh's two essay films, in which the lack of Duch's image in *S21* is (over)compensated for with an excess of (Duch's and his underlings') images (Figure 10) in *Duch*.

Figure 10: End credits background of *Duch* (Left), End credits background for *S21* (Right).

Previously, the empty room served as the background for *S21*'s end credits to roll. Here in *Duch*, the empty room serves as a visual presence of the hollowness in which Duch views his underlings and law courts' indictment of him, stressing that "God says the court of law is men's business. Men will do what they like with my flesh and blood. God has already recognized my soul" (*Duch*). This gesture then, rooted in essaying (Vann Nath's unyielding search to understand the horror of the Khmer Rouge era) and repetition and reenactment (of the discourses of truth, justice, culpability, and failure that are explored in both films), interrogates not just the original image (of the empty room) but also all images that the films unfold to the spectator. It asks after a critical mode of spectatorship, one that is able to discern and think through such images and the attendant discourses that follow them.

As Duch's performances (for the camera) are "rooted in total unacknowledgement . . . Panh refrain[s] from anchoring the confrontation in the discourse of reconciliation, forgiveness and similitude, but rather embrace[s] that of responsibility, accountability, justice

and difference,” much as what Vann Nath has endeavoured to do in his interactions with the former prison guards in *S21* (Morag 100). Panh does not allow Duch to isolate himself from the rest of society, to think and act as if he is removed from the responsibility that is placed upon each individual person, “Duch reinvents his truth in order to survive . . . I edit my film, therefore, against Duch. The only morality is the editing, the montage” (Panh and Bataille 186). The last images of *Duch* (of the film and its eponymous protagonist) are not of the defiant and evasive chief torturer; rather, they are of an old man exercising, eating and praying in his prison cell (Figure 11),—they “disturb viewers through [their] banality and striking ordinariness” (Great Directors: Jay Rosenblatt). It is remarkable to consider that, in his discussion of Jay Rosenblatt’s film *Human Remains* (1998), Brian K. Bergen-Aurand notes that the director pinpoints an image of Adolf Hitler engaged (like Duch) in the act of eating as the “disturbing genesis behind” the film and that “[t]his simple image, of possibly the most infamous dictator in modern history, involved in the simplest and possibly most commonly shared human activity was the link returning Hitler to the human community” (Great Directors: Jay Rosenblatt). Bergen-Aurand’s assertion that “only someone who can hunger can give food. Only one who eats can be political and ethical. Only an embodied, vulnerable human being can be responsible” returns Duch (in spite of his isolation due to his imprisoned status as well as his vehement protestations of reduced culpability for his actions) back to human society.

Just like *Human Remains*, *Duch* offers a provocative call to the spectator:

[It] calls into question the assumed transparency of the demonising or idolising of these dictators by including what is ordinarily excluded. It includes their humanity, thus including them in humanity, reminding us that they are culpable for their crimes precisely because they are human, like us. (Great Directors: Jay Rosenblatt)

Figure 11: Duch in his prison cell carrying out daily, mundane activities such as eating as a prison guard watches over.

His humanity and frailty restored to his person through the montage of mundane activities carried out in the prison cell—“Thanks to the cinema, the truth comes out: montage versus mendacity” (Panh and Bataille 114)—he is then, “human at every instant; that’s the reason why he can be judged and condemned. No one can rightly authorize himself to humanize or dehumanize anyone. But no one can occupy Duch’s place in the human community” (“Interview with a Torturer”). The film charges spectators with the responsibility then, to recognise not just Duch as a human being (with the responsibility that attends such recognition) but also to recognise their own responsibility, their own “place in the human community” (“Interview with a Torturer”).

No longer a spectre who haunts *S21*, Duch is called to account for his crimes, at the very instance of the restoration of his humanity through cinema. Through the film’s failure to cajole Duch to “explain himself” (*Duch*) and his criminal deeds adequately, through Panh’s failed stratagem of replicating the “bodily memory” strategy employed in *S21* to make

manifest Duch's testimony onscreen, through the failure then of the narrative *telos* that is established at the outset of the film (to film Duch confessing his crimes in a pivotal "smoking gun" sequence), the film is rendered incomplete, a failure that, nevertheless (or even because of the failing), repeats the gesture embedded at the end of *S21*, namely that the responsibility (or even debt) owed to those who suffered and perished in the Khmer Rouge era—by survivors, by Cambodians born after that dismal age, and by the film's spectator—to remember the traumatic past must be carried on and honoured.

Chapter Two

Screening The Essay Film in Indonesia: Sites of Bodily Memory, Collaborative Filmmaking, and Failure

I do not believe that I am documenting a pre-existing reality. I believe whatever is happening is happening for the camera.

Joshua Oppenheimer, “The Art of Filmmaking Revisited”

“You! What’s your name? Give it a try. Don’t be scared!” In this early scene in *The Act of Killing, Director’s Cut*, paramilitary leader Herman Koto spots a young child and points her out to two of his fellow gangsters (Figure 12), who immediately approach and cajole (or even coerce) her into “[giving] it a try” and not “be[ing] scared” to be part of a proposed scene that involves the “torching” of houses belonging to “communists”. The child’s body gestures visibly demonstrate her unwillingness and fear. With her arms folded and a pained grimace on her face, she initially resists being pulled over but is nevertheless dragged forcibly to Herman. Capturing an instance of putting the (unwilling) body to work in order for a scene to be produced, this scene in *The Act of Killing* highlights the problematic of corporeal bodies being turned into film bodies—mere material for the cinematic apparatus. How can film ethics possibly arise from such “manipulative, intimidating, and exploitative methods” (Siregar), from Oppenheimer “going to great lengths, creating situations where things really spiral out of control” (“The Art of Filmmaking Revisited”)?

Figure 12. The gangsters recruit a young girl for their proposed scene as a crowd watches on.

This chapter addresses film bodies, traumatic experience, collaborative filmmaking, ethical spectatorship, and failure through an engagement with Oppenheimer's *The Act of Killing* (2012) and *The Look of Silence* (2014). Shot simultaneously, the two films differ markedly in their critical meditations on the 1965–66 killings of Indonesian “communists” and their alleged sympathizers. *The Act of Killing* focuses on the perpetrators as they gleefully reenact their acts of killing while taking inspiration from Hollywood movie genres such as film noir and the Western. *The Look of Silence* “is not a sequel but ‘the second in a pair, a diptych . . . [that Oppenheimer] hopes [will be] shown side by side eventually’” (Swimmer 66). It is a more sober chronicle of the optometrist Adi Rukun's attempts to recover the memory of his slain brother by interviewing the perpetrators directly responsible for his brother's murder and the officials who gave them the authority to do so. Through such a “diptych,” Oppenheimer sets out to sustain the critical discourses and problematics that arise from one film to the next, much as how Rithy Panh's diptych on the Khmer Rouge

brutality essays, reconnects, and supplements (the lack of) the discourses and problematics of his two films.

Following Catherine Wheatley's critique of "morality criticism" as applied to "classic realist cinema," this chapter questions the ethical stakes involved when cinema is positioned as the adjudicator of ethics, creating possibilities for the process of moral deliberation to occur and be resolved within the closure of the film (176). In this, Wheatley (176) questions the role of the spectator vis-à-vis the viewing experience: *Does the spectator get instructed about morality from watching such a film? How can film ethics endure if only through the act of watching does the spectator accept these moral judgements, while ignoring the sensibilities of the spectator's pre-existing notions of morality or even responsibility (to think critically on the issues discussed)?* Taking these questions into consideration, this chapter argues that for cinema to ever be able to provide for the possibility of film ethics, it has to refuse the imperative to resolve and complete itself, and instead, direct its affective discharges (arising from ethical quandaries or visual and aural excesses) onto the embodied spectator so that an ethical spectatorship can be potentially realized in the cinematic encounter between the spectator and the essay film.

Both films essay the present-day conditions of Indonesia, wherein survivors and their families live in close proximity to the perpetrators. The experiences of the perpetrators and survivors of the killings are of paramount concern not just to this dissertation, but Oppenheimer as well, as he notes that when he finished shooting *The Act of Killing*, "he wasn't exactly sure [what he would create] but felt sure he could deliver 'an experience'" (Swimmer 65) that would resonate with an audience. The manner in which the Indonesian perpetrators routinely flaunt their impunity (immunity from state prosecution) and issue oblique threats of violence against the general population has led Oppenheimer to postulate a "what-if" scenario in which Nazi Germany triumphed over the will of the Allies during

World War II. When he first encountered these perpetrators, he states that he felt he had walked into just such a scenario where the Nazis were still in power (Swimmer 57). This anomaly, in which the perpetrators of mass killings are not prosecuted but instead retain some vestiges of power and authority (through their fearsome reputations as prolific executioners or connections to the political elite) over the general populace, necessitates a brief exposition of the historical context that informs both films' treatment of history, truth, and reconciliation because of just such an anomaly.

The New Order regime (Orde Baru, 1966-98) rose to power after the events of 30th September 1965, when six Indonesian army generals and a lieutenant were kidnapped and murdered. Their murders were pinned on the Communist Party of Indonesia (Partai Komunis Indonesia or PKI). Through the mobilization of paramilitary groups (along with covert aid from the CIA and MI6, among other such foreign agencies) to consolidate power and authority, a campaign of terror and killings against the PKI and their alleged conspirators was carried out by General Suharto. An estimated 500,000 to 1,000,000 PKI members and alleged confederates were murdered in 1965-66.⁶ However, only the killings of the seven army officers were recognized in the official narrative crafted by the New Order regime. The killings of the estimated 500,000 to 1,000,000 were suppressed or otherwise glossed over by framing "the Army's role as curbing and calming down th[e] wave of 'spontaneous' popular violence" (Anderson 282) that ostensibly arose to counter the communist threat.

In this, the term "killings" will be used in this chapter to refer to the 1965-66 murders, not only to maintain continuity with *The Act of Killing* but more importantly, to avoid using "the term 'massacre' [which] has all too often reinforced the suggestion that the killings were

⁶ While most scholars are in agreement that the killings ceased only in 1968, 1965-66 marks the bloodiest period of the killings. For a discussion of the foreign agencies' covert actions during the killings, see Bradley Simpson's essay "International Dimensions of the 1965—68 Violence in Indonesia" in *The Contours of Mass Violence in Indonesia, 1965—68*.

carried out in a frenzy . . . [when i]n fact, the vast majority of victims were detained for a period of days or weeks before being executed, strong prima facie evidence that the violence was coordinated and controlled” (Kammen and McGregor 7). That the above-mentioned “facts” are absent (or not further developed) in the films is a major point of contention among scholars.

Nominated for an Oscar in the category of “Best Documentary Feature” in 2013, *The Act of Killing* has generated much critical and scholarly reception. There is almost universal acclaim for the film’s innovative use of reenactments (by perpetrators) to represent the killings: the perpetrators’ “sense of depraved vanity is what propels [the film] into a different category of historical re-creation” (Reiff 25); “[t]he testimonies of [the film] work together to provoke different flights of thought that move past Western structures of truth and morality embedded in documentary forms” (Pringle 27); and that “[w]ithout this film technique, the stories [of the killings], though tragic and important, would likely have remained one-dimensional” (Woods 561). Critical reception for *The Look of Silence* has been, at least at the time of writing, relatively meager in comparison as it did not appear on the film festival circuit until late August of 2014.⁷ The only renowned scholar who has reviewed the film is B. Ruby Rich. In a brief essay, she describes it as a “masterpiece, this time less ironic and therefore scarier” (73). Returning to the major point of contention highlighted earlier, it is “the near-total absence of context, either about the historical facts or about the production process itself [that either] . . . doesn’t help us understand what we’re seeing or how we’re seeing it” (Tony Rayns, quoted in Chaudhuri 178) or a “strikin[g]” (Woods 559) approach that “underscor[es] the filmmaker’s primary interest in the present instead of the past” (*Identity and Pleasure* 123). Indeed, the only form of “authoritative” facts occurs near the

⁷ http://www.imdb.com/title/tt3521134/releaseinfo?ref_=tt_ov_inf

beginning of both films when intertitles provide a brief historical context of the 1965-66 killings (Figures 13, 14, and 15).

Figure 13. This is the only set of authoritative “facts” screened to the spectator in *The Look of Silence*. *The Act of Killing* has the same 3 passages (with an addition of “ethnic Chinese” to those who could be accused of being a communist) with five additional passages acknowledging paramilitaries and gangsters as the perpetrators, while highlighting the inclusion of reenactments regarding the process and consequences of the killings.

Figure 14. Additional sets of authoritative “facts” in *The Act of Killing*.

Figure 15. Additional sets of authoritative “facts” in *The Act of Killing*.

Rayns’ criticism that *The Act of Killing* “doesn’t help us understand what we’re seeing or how we’re seeing it” (quoted in Chaudhuri 178, emphasis added) in an overt fashion finds correspondence (not necessarily agreement) with Jacques Derrida’s postulation

that “the whole history, the whole semantics of the European *idea* in its Greek genealogy, as we know—as we see—relates seeing to knowing” (*Memoirs of the Blind* 12). The significance of representation then (of historical ‘fact’, of survivors or their absence), as it pertains to the essay film, is raised at the very outset of the films.

Yet, how can this European *idea* relating to seeing and knowing (*Memoirs of the Blind* 12), be extended and applied to two essay films that examine both Indonesia’s tumultuous period of 1965-66 and the current contemporary period? This critical detour is necessary to anticipate the obvious objection raised in relation to geographical and cultural specificity and establishes a problematic, wherein any theorization of an ideal, embodied spectator—who is receptive to the challenges and provocations generated by the cinematic encounter with the essay film—is necessarily troubled due to the very nature of such (critical) speculations. In order to do so, this “*idea*” must first be unpacked through (brief) recourse to the histories of Western metaphysical thought and film theory. A strain of Enlightenment thinking, this “*idea*” traces its genealogy, as Derrida posits, to the Greek philosopher Plato’s “Allegory of the Cave,” which “show[s] in a figure how far [human] nature is enlightened or unenlightened” (285). In the Cave,

human beings liv[e] in a underground den, which has a mouth open towards the light and reaching all along the den; here they have been from their childhood, and have their legs and necks chained so that they cannot move, and can only see before them, being prevented by the chains from turning round their heads. Above and behind them a fire is blazing at a distance, and between the fire and the prisoners there is a raised way; and you will see, if you look, a low wall built along the way, like the screen which marionette players have in front of them, over which they show the puppets. (Plato 285)

For the prisoners of the cave, “the truth would be literally nothing but the shadows of the images” as they mistake the (shadow) representations for reality (Plato 286). The cinema as the technological successor of the Cave has been theorized by film theorists such as Jean-Louis Baudry, who asserts that the “basic cinematographic apparatus” (208) ensures that the spectator has no “means to act in any way upon the object of his perception, [and] change his viewpoint as he would like” (220), thereby relating what is seen onscreen to what is subsequently known or learned as uncontested truth. Rayns seemingly wants to return to a cinema that is dominated by Apparatus Theory, in which the cinema indeed “relates seeing to knowing” in a monological fashion for its interpellated spectators (*Memoirs of the Blind* 12). Discussions within this chapter do not dismiss the role or significance of sight in critically examining the (filmic) text; rather, they raise key questions about the relationship between sight and epistemology and focus on “how we see, how we are able, allowed or made to see, and how we see this seeing and unseeing therein,” questions raised by the very essay films themselves (Hal Foster, quoted in “Introduction” 12-13).

Indonesia, with a “population of more than 220 million . . . [who live in] extremely diverse ethnic communities residing across the thousands of islands in the archipelagic nation-state” (*Identity and Pleasure* 1-2) is decidedly not a European or even Western-oriented monological entity. This historical fact is not meant to imply that Indonesia has not embarked on its own Enlightenment project (usually configured in the contemporary epoch as the catch-all term “Modernity”). Neither does this geographical fact indicate that Indonesian spectators’ experiences of the cinema are somehow radically/exotically different from that of Western spectators’. It is a matter of degree, not kind, that informs the extent to which the “European *idea* [, which] . . . relates seeing to knowing” (*Memoirs of the Blind* 12) can be extrapolated to Indonesian spectators because of the primacy of sight in the filmic experience. Furthermore it has to be acknowledged (once again) that such a postulation is fraught with

complications. Because I am a Singaporean of Straits Chinese ethnicity, I do not engage in the fatuous endeavor of “seeing” and “experiencing” Oppenheimer’s films as an Indonesian (as if there ever was a stable, unified identity Indonesians share in despite the ethnic diversity of their country); rather, this dissertation privileges the affective charges of the screening experience that an embodied, engaged spectator would be receptive to, and whenever helpful to the critical discussion, highlight the experiential specifics that would register or resonate with Indonesia spectators who spent their formative years being (force) fed New Order propaganda.⁸

The linkages that exist between Enlightenment/Modernity, the cinema, and truth in a primarily European context can also be (potentially) located in the “orality-oriented social environment” (*Identity and Pleasure* 90) of Indonesia. Ariel Heryanto posits that “Indonesians are more susceptible to the charms of the moving image and creatively more responsive to what the video camera offers, than to the written word” (*Identity and Pleasure* 190). Thus, this privileging of moving image over written word functionally assigns “a high priority to fluid, instantaneous and highly collective participatory mode of communication (features that characterize oral communication)” over the more pensive and solitary act of reading (190). In relation to the primacy of sight as it pertains to the experience of *watching* a film, Heryanto notes,

many [Indonesians] . . . shar[e] important information and messages through face-to-face communication [which] necessarily involves the physical presence of the interlocutors, expressing themselves through both spoken words, and more

⁸ One example of this will suffice for the present. The significance of Herman Koto’s repeated role as a murderous female in the reenactments, beyond serving as the overweight (cross-dressing) comic relief, is a direct reference to the fabricated account of the infamous “Communist female orgy . . . involving naked members of the leftist organization Indonesian Women’s Movement (Gerakan Wanita Indonesia, or GERWANI) dancing and singing while mutilating the bodies of the generals” (*Identity and Pleasure* 81).

importantly the unsaid, and body language, in specific spatial and temporal ambience of ‘real time’ interactions. (191)

The binary of presence/absence (and the privileging of the former) that Derrida seeks to deconstruct in Western metaphysics is seemingly prevalent as well in Indonesia. Heryanto acknowledges that Indonesian society is “much more varied and dynamic . . . than [he has] crudely portrayed here . . . [but] what can be *certain* is [written] historiography has never been one of Indonesia’s strongest traditions or leading aspirations” (91, emphasis added). The strongest case that can be marshaled to bolster the claim that this “*idea* [,which] . . . relates seeing to knowing” (*Memoirs of the Blind* 12), finds correspondence with Indonesian spectators comes out of Medan⁹, Indonesia’s “third largest city” (*Identity and Pleasure* 131). Heryanto cites from Loren Ryter’s unpublished doctoral thesis: “in Medan, the advent of electrical ‘illumination’ corresponded to the introduction of the moving image, producing certain identification between modern [sic] enlightenment and cinematographic representation” (Ryter, quoted in *Identity and Pleasure* 131). Here, the primacy of the moving image (as enabled by the cinema) is coupled with technological marvel (as enabled by modernity). Medan plays a significant role in *The Act of Killing* and *The Look of Silence*, as the featured perpetrators hail from that city (Anwar Congo and Adi Zulkadry for the former film, and Amir Hasan Nasution and Inong Syah for the latter film). It is the “bodily memor[ies]” (Oppenheimer 244) of these perpetrators that Oppenheimer taps as wells of memory and trauma, thus engaging in a dangerous and ethically complex mode of filmmaking collaboration through planning and filming their reenactments.

⁹ For a comprehensive overview of the 1965–66 killings in the context of Medan and North Sumatra, see Benedict Anderson’s “Impunity” essay in *Killer Images* (2012).

This notion of “bodily memor[ies]” (244) was earlier explored in the chapter on Rithy Panh’s essay films. Oppenheimer refines this methodology of the corporeal body as site of memory by framing his operation as:

An archaeological performance [which] entails successively working with, and working through, the gestures, routines, and rituals that were the motor of the massacres. The successive performances aim both to tap an embodied memory of singular gestures and to reveal the body’s singular movements as moments of the minutely geared motions of a killing machine that mobilized well-rehearsed ideological roles. The method seeks to reveal what was at once singular, and scripted, and to do so by going through the motions of historical events to develop a densely layered artifact. Here each layer is at once rehearsal and performance, reenactment and response. This method, which typically moves from interview via narration and re-narration through increasingly elaborate restagings. (“History and Histrionics: Vision Machine’s Digital Poetics” 181)

Oppenheimer places critical stress on this “archaeological performance” as a form of collaborative filmmaking in *The Act of Killing* and *The Look of Silence*, both of which will be discussed in this next part of this dissertation.

THE ACT OF KILLING

Why do people watch films about Nazis? To see power and sadism! We can do that! We can make something even more sadistic than... more sadistic than what you see in movies about Nazis. Sure I can. Because there's never been a movie where heads get chopped off - except in fiction, but that's different - because I did it in real life!

Anwar Congo, *The Act of Killing*

The New Order regime under Suharto made use of paramilitary groups of gangsters (known as *preman*) to carry out the mass killings of “communists” in order to consolidate their power. These gangsters were never brought to justice but were instead rewarded or allowed to continue operating as criminals in their respective “fiefdoms”. Benedict Anderson has coined the term “uncivil servants” to describe the gangsters, who played the role of the “half-hidden left hand of the New Order Leviathan” (281). This is an apt description that carries over into present-day Indonesia. In *The Act of Killing*, Pemuda Pancasila, the paramilitary group that the featured gangsters are affiliated with, is shown to have intimate ties with the Indonesian political elite. Jusuf Kalla, a key member in Indonesian politics, gives a speech at a Pemuda Pancasila conference while wearing its striking uniform (Figure 16). Kalla served as Vice-President in President Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono’s first-term administration and reclaimed this position in the current-day administration of President Joko Widodo. His words affirm the state’s continuing relationship with gangsters/uncivil servants:

Gangsters are people who work outside the system—not for the government. The word ‘gangster’ comes from ‘free men’. This nation needs free ‘men’! If everyone worked for the government—we’d be a nation of bureaucrats. We’d get nothing done. We need gangsters to get things done. Free, private men who get things done. Use your muscles! Muscles aren’t for beating people up—although beating people up is sometimes needed. Once more, Pancasila! (*The Act of Killing*)

Figure 16. Vice President Jusuf Kalla extolls the “virtues” of Indonesian gangsters.

One can only speculate as to what an Indonesian spectator might think of (or recoil in disgust from) upon seeing a powerful elected official of the “world’s third-largest democracy”¹⁰ extoll the “virtues” of Indonesian gangsters (frequently former killers) in circumventing the rule of law.

Oppenheimer too collaborates with gangsters to achieve his objectives; in his case, having them carry out the reenacted “acts of killing” that constitute his film. Is there symmetry in the relationship between the state and the gangsters and the relationship between Oppenheimer and the gangsters? In working with the same gangsters who perpetuated atrocities against civilians under the exculpatory auspices of the New Order regime, does Oppenheimer risk extending the gesture of filmic exculpation to the gangsters by allowing them near-free reign to construct their own narratives in his film? There is a problematic established here then, wherein the corporeal bodies of the gangsters that committed the “acts

¹⁰ <http://www.asia-pacific.undp.org/content/rbap/en/home/presscenter/articles/2014/07/09/indonesia-world-s-third-largest-democracy-goes-to-the-polls.html>

of killing” intersect with the film bodies of the gangsters who reenact the aforementioned acts, almost as if Oppenheimer is repeating (in the film’s “realtime” unfolding of its reenactments) Panh’s own gestures of essaying, reenactment and repetition, in which the latter places the image of the empty room (that represent the emptying of culpability that Duch and his former underlings engage in in *Duch* and *S21* respectively) at the end of his two films.

When do such historical acts enter into the present reenactments and how does such mediation (through time, space and the cinematic apparatus) affect both sets of acts? *The Act of Killing* prominently features scenes in which the gangsters actively engage in the pre-production phases of their reenacted “acts of killing”. Anwar Congo, the primary protagonist of *The Act of Killing*, personally selects a variety of costumes from his home that he hopes will “express [his] vision” for his reenactments (*The Act of Killing*). Anwar also conducts a location scouting trip to a rooftop which he claims is haunted by “many ghosts . . . because many people were killed here” by him (*The Act of Killing*). After watching footage of this scene, in which he also demonstrates his favored method of killing—strangulation with a makeshift garrote fashioned from wire and a plank of wood—he notes that he “never would have worn white pants . . . [because it makes him] look like [he’s] dressed for a picnic” (*The Act of Killing*). He also comments that, unlike his jovial dancing and humorous mannerisms in the scene, his “acting has to be violent” for the reenacted “acts of killing” (*The Act of Killing*). Anwar and his protégé Herman also engage in discussions of the themes and stylistic elements a film should have. They posit that “people watch films about Nazis . . . [t]o see power and sadism” but also warn against causing “the audience . . . [to feel] tense the whole time—with nothing to entertain them [as the film] will never work” (*The Act of Killing*). To “attract a huge audience” then, “[h]umor . . . [is] a must,” which is mainly

supplied through Herman, who functions as the comic relief in *The Act of Killing* (*The Act of Killing*) with his banter and ill-fitting appearances when cross-dressing.

Such moments of self-reflexivity signal that the gangsters are very much aware that they are being filmed and thus, any bodily gesture or piece of dialogue of theirs is marked by the potentiality of being contrived, an “act” not “done as an outward sign of a [genuine] condition, state, or feeling” but rather “[a]n operation of the mind” to advance their own agendas, whether to gain fear, respect or empathy (“act, n.” *OED Online*). This differs then from the utilization of “bodily memory” in *S21* (Oppenheimer 244). Oppenheimer notes that “[t]he conditions of impunity and celebration in Indonesia mean [*The Act of Killing* is] not getting memory. [The film is] getting performance, something intended for a spectator” (“Interview: Joshua Oppenheimer on Investigating ‘*The Act of Killing*’”). Do such (potentially) contrived acts (of killing, power, and contrition) function as an airtight seal, preventing any accidental (or unwanted) gestures from being captured and projected onto the screen? Or are there any slippages when the corporeal and film bodies of the gangsters intersect? Taking into account Oppenheimer’s caution that “every documentary scene is inherently collaboration between subject and filmmaker, and it is inherently performative, too” (“Evil, art and politics in documentary film” 203), these problematics will be analyzed through the body gestures of the film bodies in correspondence with the cinematic structures of the film (such as narrative, humor, and chronological ordering of scenes).

In exposing the machinations of the cinematic apparatus in terms of narrative and image-making right from the beginning of the film, Oppenheimer sets out to position *The Act of Killing* against a realist mode of documentary filmmaking; instead, the film works in the essay film genre, or, to use a term coined by Oppenheimer, as a “documentary of the imagination” (Behlil 26). Surreal, fragmentary and self-reflexive, the film casts into doubt the authenticity of its contents. Rather than employing a conventional “talking-head” mode to

document the “acts of killing,” what is instead documented are the gangsters engaging in the pre-production and production phases of their reenactments, which are informed by the gangsters’ love of Hollywood blockbusters such as the noir-gangster films of Robert Mitchum and the Westerns of John Wayne.

The Act of Killing does not veil or dismiss the fictional set pieces constructed by the gangsters to create a façade of authenticity but rather incorporates such fictional devices into itself. In this manner then, *The Act of Killing* eschews the conventions of the documentary form by “utilizing [the reenactments] as its framing structure” (King 30). King elucidates this when he posits that “[c]ertain kinds of truths . . . are better sought out through a framework that not only owns up to its contamination by fiction, but goes a step further: revealing, embracing, and working with the fictions that are already operative,” in this case, the role that cinema played in the socio-political climate of post-New Order Indonesia (30). As provocatively posed by Janet Walker, “[w]hat is a documentary interview . . . if not a staged event that comes into being and exists for the purposes of a given film?” (15). With reference to the earlier claim that the film text has to be made manifest by something exterior to it, what is “staged” to serve *The Act of Killing*’s “purpose” then is to not only undercut any claims to the unmediated authenticity of its content (which would lead to the interpellation of spectators due to its “truth quotient”) but also to render fragile the dichotomy that freezes Art on one side and Reality on the other. As a “documentary of the imagination,” *The Act of Killing* seeks then to juxtapose both fiction and nonfiction elements in its essay of the mass-killings in 1965-66 and in so doing, this juxtaposition marks their differential or supplemental (rather than oppositional) relation to each other right from the outset—the borders that separate reenactment from representation, authenticity from inauthenticity, and the film from the “real” world are shown to be untenable.

The reenactments point to a correspondence between the cinema and violence, which is one that goes beyond employing the generic tropes of Hollywood gangster, Western, and horror films to frame the gangsters' reenacted "acts of killing". Having begun their careers in crime as petty criminals scalping cinema tickets, the gangsters featured in the film increasingly escalated the violence and depravity of their crimes. The communists were viewed as antagonists because they "demanded a ban on American films" which cut into the gangsters' profits because such films "were popular" with the general movie-going public (*The Act of Killing*). The antagonism between the gangsters and the communists was then fruitfully exploited by the New Order military dictatorship that came to power after the events of 30th September 1965. Gangsters such as Anwar were recruited into paramilitary groups (like the aforementioned Pemuda Pancasila) to carry out the extrajudicial executions of communists.

Anwar implicates the cinema directly in his acts of killing several times in *The Act of Killing*. The cinema not only provided an income for him through scalping (which was regularly undermined by communist protests against Western films) but also served as an apparatus capable of altering his psychological makeup in a manner that facilitated said killings. Having watched "happy movies, like Elvis movies," Anwar would saunter across the street to the paramilitary office, "[s]till in the mood of the film" and then proceed to kill "happily," as though induced into a trance by the cinematic apparatus (*The Act of Killing*). Anwar also credits "gangster films, where they always kill with wire," for giving him the "inspiration" to create an efficient tool for killing: the aforementioned makeshift garrote (*The Act of Killing*).

Did Hollywood (inadvertently) collaborate with Anwar to put to use an efficient weapon for killing? Perhaps. Cinema does not just enable and inform Anwar's acts of killings. He also uses it to justify these "acts," through his reading of a propaganda film

called *Pengkhianatan G 30 September* (1984). Cinema's uneasy relationship with violence in an Indonesia context is made manifest most prominently in this film, which,

[f]or at least the first ten years of its circulation, . . . was either the primary or the only available source of detailed information for most Indonesians about what might have happened in September and October 1965:" the murders of the seven Army officers that served as the first salvo in a (supposed) communist plot to seize power and Suharto's "heroic . . . move to rescue the nation-state from the evil force of the communists. (Screening the 1965 Violence 224)

A military-commissioned "medium of [filmic] psywar" (*Identity and Pleasure* 78), "*Pengkhianatan G 30 September* played a significant role in "the justification for the [1965-66] massacre," extracting "silence about its occurrence" and maintaining "the legitimacy of the New Order's authoritarianism" ("Screening the 1965 Violence" 224). Left out in this official filmic account are "the killings of around one million Indonesians in the ensuing months at the instigation and with the support of the army" ("Screening the 1965 Violence" 224). *Pengkhianatan G 30 September* makes an appearance in the director's cut of *The Act of Killing*, wherein Anwar watches the film on a Sanyo television set and comments that though "[s]ome children were traumatized by the film" when they watched it at the cinema where he worked, "deep inside, [he] was proud . . . because [he] killed the communists . . . who look[ed] so cruel in the film" in depraved ways that "went way beyond anything in the film" (*The Act of Killing, Director's Cut*).

Pengkhianatan G 30 September provides a means for Anwar to retroactively reassess and justify his "acts of killing," as he categorically states, "For me, that film is the *one* thing that makes me feel not guilty. I watch the film and feel reassured" (*The Act of Killing, Director's Cut*, emphasis added). When Adi Zulkadry, a fellow killer involved in the 1965-66

massacres, disagrees and says that the film is “a lie,” Anwar wavers slightly but ultimately closes the discussion, saying, “But we shouldn’t talk about this, Adi. We shouldn’t say bad things about that film to outsiders,” referring here to both Oppenheimer, who had asked the two killers about what the propaganda film meant to them, and the spectator (*The Act of Killing, Director’s Cut*). For the Indonesian spectator, watching one of the perpetrators categorically deny the veracity of a propaganda film that “established the central and overarching framework for any public discussion, fantasy or allusion for most of the New Order period” (*Identity and Pleasure* 81-82) must have been a shock to the senses.

Even without the above scenes that detail the entrenched links between cinema and violence in an Indonesian context (having been excised from the theatrical cut which most spectators would see), the initial introduction of Anwar and his unruly posse inextricably links the cinema as a key pillar of the killings. The film acquaints the spectator to Anwar and Herman (the film captions designate them as “[e]xecutioner in 1965” and “[g]angster and paramilitary leader” respectively) as they engage in an informal pre-production scouting trip. Both of them are searching for suitable “women with children . . . to play communist wives” who would “try to prevent [the gangsters] from burning down [their] house,” the same scene that the young girl was pressured to participate in, as mentioned in the beginning of this chapter (*The Act of Killing*).

Figure 17. Herman grabs a child and wails melodramatically, causing the crowd to erupt in laughter.

Ostensibly a scene infused with horror as vulnerable women and children watch helplessly on as the gangsters “raze” their habitations, the sequence is instead framed by Herman’s comedic antics as he instructs the “cast” of children and women on how to behave during the shooting of the scene. Herman melodramatically grabs a child and weeps, which in turn causes the children and women to burst out laughing, an emotion that is diametrically opposite to the one Herman wants to invoke in the proposed scene (Figure 17). Herman continues to undercut the seriousness of an atrocity committed against vulnerable civilians through comedy as he quips that the child “actor” should not “worry if” he brushes against the “mother’s” breasts as “he is still a kid,” provoking further laughter among the gathered crowd (*The Act of Killing*). The levity and humor that Herman provides in this scene should be read in light of his earlier comment about humor being an essential element in any movie. Not only is “[h]umour . . . a must” to “attract a huge audience,” it is also essential in any act of manipulation to facilitate the recruitment of “performers” for the reenacted “acts of killing” (*The Act of Killing*). It is a perverse demonstration of Heryanto’s notion that “the

pursuit of and enjoyment of pleasure is never separated from more serious moral and social concerns” (*Identity and Pleasure* 20).

The scene itself is highly contrived, and the divide between Art and Reality (always a central concern for the essay film as noted in the earlier chapter on Panh) is blurred as Herman asks, “Ready?” before he and his fellow gangsters start aggressively shouting “Kill them! Destroy their house!” in one single take with no editing transitions to demarcate Art and Reality into their respective spheres (*The Act of Killing*). The civilians’ pleas of “No, please don’t!” are mingled with Herman’s aggressive instructions for them to “Cry! Weep! Keep crying!” for the camera (*The Act of Killing*). The sequence ends with Herman announcing, “Okay, cut, cut!” and then cuts to a shot of the crowd clapping and cheering in approval for a scene in which they participated as victims, a puzzling act when considering Herman’s claim that “[t]his whole area was communist” (*The Act of Killing*). This scene serves as a microcosm for the apathy or ignorance (attributable to *Pengkhianatan G 30 September*) of the Indonesian population in regards to the mass killings, as they are temporally and emotionally removed from the traumatic events of 1965-66. For the Indonesian spectator, watching Herman’s morbid antics generate not revulsion but (feigned) elation or apathy must have been unnerving, if only for the normalized emotions depicted onscreen that they themselves may have replicated towards “communists” and their kin.

With the focus of the film trained on the gangsters who have committed the “acts of killing,” what then of the victims? The perpetrators and victims of the killings do not interact with each other; in fact, the victims are entirely absent in *The Act of Killing*, save one. Oppenheimer asserts in his “Director’s Statement”¹¹ on the official website of the film that *The Act of Killing* film crew “faced the greatest danger when filming survivors . . . Not only did we feel unsafe filming the survivors, we worried for *their* safety.” The absence of the

¹¹ See <http://theactofkilling.com/statements/> for Oppenheimer’s complete “Director’s Statement”.

victims in *The Act of Killing* raises two disconcerting questions: Who is the film being made for and to what purpose?

The gangsters alternately use the reenacted “acts of killing” to revel in their “heroic” exploits against their insidious “communist” victims, or work through the psychological trauma such acts foist upon them. The sole instance in which a victim (explicitly identified as a “real” victim) of the killing appears in a substantial role in the film is marked by absence and failure, not just on the director Oppenheimer’s part¹² but also the film’s. The victim, Suryono, attempts to convince the gangsters to reenact the abduction and killing of his Chinese stepfather, but his request is dismissed out of hand by them as being “too complicated . . . to shoot” and that it would only serve as an impediment to the film’s completion (*The Act of Killing*).

Suryono’s testimony is never brought up again and he is relegated to playing the vulnerable victim in a reenacted “act of killing”. As a result, his words are the only partial fragments of his effort to recuperate the trauma of his stepfather’s murder. The failure to represent Suryono’s testimony through a re-enactment sequence marks a conspicuous absence in the film, one which the gangsters unconvincingly try to cover up with their various reasons to not film it. The shot which immediately follows the gangsters’ refusal is of Suryono’s downcast face, ostensibly marked by abjection because he is now playing a suspected communist in a reenacted “act of killing” (Figure 18). His character’s facial expressions become increasingly wretched, as tears and saliva pour down his face as he begs for mercy. The sequence ends with the “killers” refusing the “communist’s” request to either

¹² In an interview with *Cineaste*, Oppenheimer reveals that the scene in which Suryono recounts his childhood trauma to the gangsters went unnoticed by both his co-director and him because they were busy shooting another scene. This was “an error of omission” that made him feel “terrible” and “dirty” (Behlil 30). It took Oppenheimer the better part of two years to recognize this “error,” by which time Suryono had unfortunately “died due to complications from diabetes” (Behlil 30).

“give a message to [his] family [o]r . . . speak to them one last time” before they strangle him to death with a makeshift garrote (*The Act of Killing*).

Figure 18. Suryono’s abject expression speaks to both the emotions of the character he is playing as well as his disappointment in being unable to reenact his stepfather’s murder.

In considering why Oppenheimer chose to place this scene in the final cut of the film, it is useful to consider Peggy Phelan’s postulation that “[t]he description itself does not reproduce the object, it rather helps . . . to restage and restate the effort to remember what is lost” (147). To film and thereby “reproduce” Suryono’s personal tragedy would have meant rendering it ossified, just another in a long line of reenacted “acts of killing” that permeate the film. Without filmic representation (through reenactment), the absence of Suryono’s testimony “remind[s] [the spectator] how loss acquires meaning and generates recovery—not only of and for the object, but for the one[s] who remember,” thereby placing the responsibility to help Suryono recuperate his trauma not on the gangsters but on the spectator to sustain this impulse, to “rehearse and repeat the disappearance of the subject who longs always to be remembered” (Phelan 147). His character’s abject visage and rebuffed request to

“speak to [his family] one last time” can be said to take on new meaning in light of his disclosure as a “real” victim as they serve as visual reminders of the film’s failure¹³ to manifest his personal tragedy onscreen (*The Act of Killing*). Suryono’s proposal that his testimony be used only as “input for the film” then functions not only as an unrealized “input” but also an invitation for the spectator to recognize and reflect on his trauma and the traumas of the other (unrepresented) victims (*The Act of Killing*).

Suryono’s first appearance in *The Act of Killing*—a film caption introduces him as “Anwar’s neighbor”—is itself problematic, wherein he plays the role of a gangster who demands that an old man confess to being a communist (Figure 19). The scene is staged in the living room of a house, one that is packed not only with gangsters and ex-death squad killers but also women and children of all ages.

Figure 19. Suryono’s character harangues an old man who plays a suspected communist.

¹³ This notion of the possibilities that arise from instances of failure will be further developed in the portions concerning *The Look of Silence*.

Suryono's character threatens to "smash" an old man's grandchild if he does not acquiesce and confess to being a communist, a confession that would surely lead to his murder.

Suryono "the gangster" here stands in for the "real" gangsters who killed his Chinese step-father and foisted such childhood trauma onto him. This scene precedes the above-mentioned scene in which Suryono discloses his status as a "real" victim.

Why does the film introduce Suryono to the spectator as a nondescript "neighbor" of Anwar's and then as a man who ostensibly harbors the same violent tendencies as the gangsters? By deploying the realist mode of "chronological sequencing" against itself, does Suryono's violent persona and subsequent revelation that he is a "real" victim signal the film's critique of the totalizing power of the cinematic apparatus (*Projecting History* 8)? In so doing, the spectator is provoked or, to follow Rascaroli's term, implicated into critically examining how such manipulation functions both blatantly and clandestinely? Just as it did at the very beginning, *The Act of Killing* here exposes with this essayistic gesture the manipulating capabilities of the cinematic apparatus—whereby the images and sounds onscreen show, tell and imprint meaning(s) onto the spectator

This reiterated gesture of exposure revisits the relationship between exculpation and the cinema that was set out in the beginning of *The Act of Killing*. Throughout the film, Anwar gradually seems to display a measure of regret and contrition over his "acts of killing". Three sequences that focus on Anwar and children signal this potential "character development". The first is the aforementioned sequence involving Suryono, wherein Anwar and the other gangsters coldly rebuff his attempts to represent his childhood trauma through a film reenactment. The second sequence shows Anwar tenderly instructing his young grandsons in a lesson on empathy. One of them has "injured" the leg of a duckling and Anwar cajoles him to apologize to the duckling and "pet her a little" as recompense for the harm he has inflicted on her. The third sequence occurs towards the end of the film, where a

reenactment of the “massacre [of] the residents of Kampung Kolam” is filmed (*The Act of Killing*). Many child “performers” are shown sobbing and otherwise displaying visible signs of distress through their body gestures *after* the shoot has ended. Among those crying is Herman’s daughter Febby, whom he implores to “stop crying . . . [and] embarrassing” him because “[f]ilm stars only cry for a moment” (*The Act of Killing*). While smoking a cigarette, Anwar ruminates on the deleterious impact that the massacre had on the “real” residents of “Kampung Kolam,” saying, “What I regret. . . Honestly, I never expected it would look this awful. . . Imagine those children’s future. . . What future do they have? They will curse us for the rest of their lives. This was so very, very, very . . .” (*The Act of Killing*).

By all accounts, Anwar is portrayed as a loving grandfather, save for his unsettling predilection of recounting his depraved past in his grandsons’ presence and screening violent reenactment footage to them despite Oppenheimer’s voiced opposition. His concern for the massacred victims’ children (who are only represented through child “performers” recruited by the gangsters) in the wake of the “Kampung Kolam” reenactment contrasts strikingly with his earlier apathetic and dismissive reaction to Suryono’s wretched testimony. Do these three sequences in *The Act of Killing* chart a trajectory of Anwar’s moral development? Or is this a cynical manipulation of the cinematic apparatus to portray him in a better light? Anwar is very conscious that he is being filmed by the camera and possesses a sophisticated sense of how a film should be constructed in order to achieve specific aims.

The structure of *The Act of Killing*’s concluding sequences speaks to the difficulty (or even failure) of ascertaining Anwar’s motives and emotions. After the “Kampung Kolam” reenactment, the camera frames Anwar’s reflection within the borders of the rear-view mirror of a vehicle as he pensively opens and closes his eyes. With Anwar’s literal “look-back” in the rear-view mirror, does *The Act of Killing* initiate a gesture of remembering in correspondence with Anwar’s rumination of his sins and belated attempts to empathize with

his victims? Or is this too contrived a shot composition for savvy Indonesian spectators (familiar with the filmic tropes and cinematic significations of Hollywood) to take seriously or even at face value?

The very next scene reverses Anwar's established role as a feared, powerful killer in the film; he is now playing the vulnerable victim in a reenactment informed by the tropes of the Hollywood gangster film. Head and face bloodied from a presumed bludgeoning wound, Anwar the "victim" is so paralyzed by the "gangster's" threats that an unseen voice utters "Cut" to allow Anwar time to breathe and drink water to recover his composure for the rest of the shoot. When the shoot resumes, Anwar is blindfolded and "strangled" by Herman. After a few strenuous and theatrical tugs on the makeshift garrote, Anwar's right hand flails in desperation. When Herman asks him if he is "alright," Anwar mutters weakly that he "can't do that again" (*The Act of Killing*). Is Anwar being authentic here about his feelings? Or is he merely following the narrative trajectory of "moral development" that he has watched so many times in Hollywood films? The beginning of this sequence depicts two makeup-artists touching up Anwar's face before the camera cuts to Anwar instructing Herman, "Hit the table. To frighten me. Start by hitting the table. Hard." (*The Act of Killing*), highlighting just how manufactured the entire sequence (potentially) is and guarding against the interpellation of the spectator with this (onscreen) contrivance.

After a brief interlude, in which Adi Zulkadry goes shopping with his family and proclaims his guiltlessness because he was never punished for his crimes, the film returns to yet another scene featured in the beginning: the musical sequence set against the backdrop of a waterfall. To the tune of John Barry's "Born Free," Anwar and Herman (dressed respectively in a black robe and a garishly turquoise dress) are accompanied by female dancers in this sequence. Two "victims" remove their makeshift garrotes and one of them

presents Anwar with a medal (Figure 20). The victim thanks Anwar “[f]or executing [him] and sending [him] to heaven” (*The Act of Killing*).

Figure 20. In a musical sequence, a “victim” proclaims his thanks to Anwar for killing him.

Watching this musical sequence on his Sanyo television set, Anwar expresses his joy by telling Oppenheimer, “This is great, Joshua. This is very good. I never imagined I could make something so great. One thing that makes me so proud—is how the waterfall expresses such deep feelings!” (*The Act of Killing*). Anwar then asks Oppenheimer to play the scene in which he is “strangled” by the makeshift garrote. Watching in visible discomfort, Anwar asks, “Did the people I tortured feel the way I do here? I can feel what the people I tortured felt,” to which Oppenheimer counters, “Actually, the people you tortured felt far worse—because you know it’s only a film. They knew they were being killed” (*The Act of Killing*). Anwar tears up at this point and once again expresses his fear that his sins will come to haunt him.

If his body gestures and words seemingly proclaim his vulnerability in the reenactment sequence, do Anwar's tears and expression of (self-)pity for his victims signal genuine contrition for his crimes? Before this outpouring of emotion, Anwar calls his two grandsons to view the reenactment footage of him being "tortured and killed" despite Oppenheimer's voiced disapproval (*The Act of Killing*). He asks them, "Grandpa looks so sad, doesn't he[?] It's so sad, isn't it? That's *your* grandpa" (*The Act of Killing*, emphasis added). In doing so, he seeks to influence their emotions and craft a narrative for them, one that positions not only his character onscreen, but also himself as a victim and not a killer. This raises a troubling question: Has Anwar also crafted a narrative for the spectator from the very moment he appeared onscreen? Having progressed from a fearless gangster who never hesitated to murder civilians in cold blood to a kindly grandfather who teaches his grandsons to treat animals kindly and weeps when he finally confronts the sins of his past, he has undoubtedly shown signs of "character progression" and "moral development," both being hallmarks of his beloved Hollywood films. Anwar had proclaimed earlier that he "never imagined [he] could make something so great" (*The Act of Killing*) vis-à-vis the musical sequence. The use of the verb "make" suggests that rather than simply reacting spontaneously to events and questions posed to him, Anwar has instead been playing an active role in the "mak[ing]" of his portrayal in the film in order to interpellate spectators into his narrative of contrition and remorse (*The Act of Killing*).

The ending of *The Act of Killing* raises yet more questions about the authenticity and intentionality of Anwar's body gestures and words. The ending sequence starts with Anwar—dressed in a striking mustard-colored suit and pants—walking into a shop that sells handbags. He ascends the stairs, and in yet another filmic gesture of remembering, returns to the "haunted" rooftop where he killed his victims and first demonstrated his use of the makeshift garrote early in the film. He reminds the spectator that "[t]his is where [the

gangsters] tortured and killed the people [they] captured” (*The Act of Killing*). He admits that “it was wrong—but [he] had to do it” (*The Act of Killing*). Anwar then retches audibly and violently expels phlegm (Figure 21).

Figure 21. Anwar retches and expels phlegm in an outward display of contrition.

Somewhat serendipitously, the wire that he had earlier used to construct the makeshift garrote—still tied to the pole—is present in this scene, as is a gunny sack that is similar to the ones “used to take away the human beings . . . [the gangsters] killed” (*The Act of Killing*). After looking over and describing his former “tools of the trade,” Anwar once again retches and expels phlegm before wiping his eyes with the back of his hand. The structure of this ending sequence seems to imply that Anwar has spontaneously walked up to the rooftop without any pre-production planning being done to prepare the rooftop with the aforementioned “props” that helped produce such visible signs of contrition. Are his body

gestures a genuine sign of contrition or are they superficial actions contrived for the camera? More importantly, does this scene exculpate Anwar?

The next shot depicts Anwar starting to descend the stairs before it cuts to a long shot of him walking out of both the handbag shop and the camera frame. Anwar pauses briefly at the threshold of the entrance before he walks away (Figure 22).

Figure 22. Anwar stops for a moment before finally exiting both the shop and the frame.

Throughout this shot, the camera never moves from its position—it employs the clichéd cinematic trope of observation as Anwar as he makes his exit. It then cuts to a black screen which displays the credits: “A film by Joshua Oppenheimer.” The director’s cut of *The Act of Killing* features a slightly different ending. After Anwar starts to descend the stairs, it does not cut to the long shot of Anwar walking out of the handbag shop. Instead, a high-angle shot depicts Anwar walking down the flight of stairs before he comes to a halt at the landing (Figure 23). Left hand resting on the banister, he is momentarily still before he raises his left

hand to wipe his eyes with his fingers. In both endings, the camera frames Anwar in a contrived manner. The spectator is noticeably separated from Anwar in both shot compositions, perhaps to remind her/him to maintain a critical distance and to not be interpellated into the narrative that Anwar constructs in *The Act of Killing*.

Figure 23. In the director's cut of the film, Anwar halts his descent down the flight of stairs, seemingly contemplating his next course of action (for the camera?).

Has Anwar truly recognized that his “acts of killing” were morally wrong? Or is his moral development merely a nod to the generic “character development” model found in Hollywood films, wherein the “protagonist . . . progresses from performing . . . [immoral] acts . . . to achieving a full realization of his moral responsibility” (Wheatley 176)? Is Anwar being genuine in his outward display of contrition when he retches? Does the film exculpate him for his sins regardless of the authenticity of this gesture? *The Act of Killing* refuses to “resolve [such ethical quandaries] by its close;” the burden is instead shifted onto the spectator to contend with (Wheatley 176). Similar to how Panh’s films reiterate, re-enact, repeat their essayistic gestures at their end, *The Act of Killing* here insists on reasserting at its

closing the artificial and contrived nature of its narrative and images. The dissertation now turns to the second-half of Oppenheimer's diptych, *The Look of Silence*, a more subdued but no less affective and essayistic film.

THE LOOK OF SILENCE

"Do the victims' families want the killings to happen again? . . . If you keep making an issue of the past—it will definitely happen again. Sooner or later, it will happen again."

M.Y. Basrun, Speaker of the Regional Legislature

The Look of Silence chronicles the optometrist Adi Rukun's (hereafter referred to simply as Adi, and not Adi Zulkadry, a featured perpetrator in *The Act of Killing*) attempts to recover the memory of his slain brother by interviewing those directly responsible for his killing and those who authorized it. As noted earlier, while *The Act of Killing* focuses on the perpetrators as they gleefully reenact their acts of killing in a theatrical fashion by taking inspiration from Hollywood movie tropes, *The Look of Silence* is a more sober chronicle, one that dampens the theatrics in favour of a more personal and poetic aesthetic and form.

While *The Look of Silence* also features perpetrators, there is now only one main sequence in which two killers reenact their murderous deeds and they do so using only an unimpressive-looking knife, as opposed to the extended and fantastical Hollywood-style sequences that Anwar and his cronies collaborate with Oppenheimer on in *The Act of Killing*. The perpetrators, Amir Hasan Nasution and Inong Syah, are more than happy to reenact how they killed Adi's brother, replicating the default mode of exuberance that Anwar and his fellow killers displayed in their reenactments for *The Act of Killing*. Adi (and the spectator)

first encounters the duo through a medium close-up of a television set that plays back a recording of them reminiscing about their nightly routines of death while strolling along the side of a road. The shot composition (enframing the television set) is a (now) familiar visual trope that was established in *The Act of Killing*, signaling that the screening experience is just as, if not moreso, important now that the spectator is able to track the bodily reactions of (the survivor) Adi as he grapples with the upsetting affective discharges that are generated from watching his brother's killers cheerfully and ghoulishly reenacting the killing. As the sequence progresses, wherein Amir and Inong inch ever closer to the killing site, the camera frequently cuts back to medium close-ups of Adi's stoic face (Figure 24).

Figure 24. The camera frequently captures Adi's stoic expressions as he watches his brother's killers reenact their killing(s) with enthusiasm. The noun "He" could refer to Ramli or any of their other victims.

This sequence is interrupted by other scenes and resumes almost thirty minutes later, marking Ramli's death (somewhat cruelly and exploitatively) as a narrative *telos* at best or a gimmicky manipulation of the spectator at its worst to continue watching on to the end for

filmic resolution of the narrative. Amir and Inong finally recount in specific detail how they murdered Ramli by “cut[ting] Ramli again and again—until he looked dead. Then [the killers] pushed him in the river” (*The Look of Silence*). Unfortunately, when Ramli grabbed ahold of some tree roots to escape death by drowning in the river, his killers escalated their acts of depravity—they “fished him out, and killed him by cutting off his penis” (*The Look of Silence*). Without attempting to mitigate their malevolent actions, Amir and Inong nevertheless portray themselves as men who were obliged to kill “communists” like Ramli, who “was probably a good person” but ended up being a victim of the “revolution” that was necessary to save Indonesia, according to New Order propaganda (*The Look of Silence*). With this contrived and maladroit gesture of pity, Adi finally loses his stoic composure as his throat visibly heaves inward, as though retching in disgust or hatred (Figure 25).

Figure 25. Adi swallows visibly when the killers feign pity for his murdered brother. The still frame does not convey the full range of Adi’s body gesture.

The camera’s focus on Adi’s bodily reaction to the reenactment (through frequent cuts that alternate between the killers’ reenactment and his impassive face) places clear

emphasis on the affects generated in the cinematic encounter between the film, the onscreen embodied spectator and the offscreen embodied spectator. Perhaps the most theatrical moment in *The Look of Silence*, this morbid act of killing can be said to, following Oppenheimer, “be given over to those very subjects that the performance of the massacres was and is intended to physically and symbolically annihilate – survivors of the terror and those still under its sway” (“Show of Force: A Cinema-se‘ance of Power and Violence in Sumatra's Plantation Belt” 304). Absent the victim, indeed all representations of the murdered, it is only by recourse to the macabre reenactments of the killings that the absent and silenced victims are felt affectively.

Barring the problematic of falling back on the morbid theatrical reenactments of killing by the perpetrators (as discussed earlier with regard to *The Act of Killing*), the “theatricality—here meant as the affect of presence—”generated by the perpetrators’ gleeful reenactment of the killing of Adi’s brother directs an affective charge onto the embodied spectator, in which the entanglement of the aesthetics of violence and ethics have to be grappled with (Willis 8). Emma Willis explains this notion of “theatricality” as that which,

exceeds the frame of conventional dramatic representation . . . it is the ‘always arriving and yet never present’ aspect of the bodies of the past, when successfully evoked, that makes them most powerful in the claim that they place upon [the embodied spectator]. (8)

Where previously, the spectator might be situated as a passive voyeur of Adi’s travels (and be interpellated by the film’s ostensible “fact-finding” or catharsis narrative), the jarring and ghoulish theatricality (in an otherwise ruminative and poetic film as compared to the gleefully morbid and theatrical *The Act of Killing*) of the killers now “underpins such an affect of arrival;” this partial representation—conjunction, even—of the slain brother

“suggests the call of the other and its ceaseless aspect” (Willis 8). Following Willis, this disruption of passive spectatorship creates the potentiality for “[a]n ethics of spectatorship . . . [that] might be said to begin with the acknowledgement that, despite an arrival that is never completed, and a lack of presence, [embodied spectators] are nonetheless located within a shared ethical space” (8). It is both fortuitous and ironic then that two of the paramilitaries who directly killed and erased millions from the official Indonesian historical archives have now, through their morbid “repertoire,” situated the memory of Adi’s brother, if not in the archive, then at the very least, in the interstices between “archive” and “repertoire” (Willis 129). Building off Diana Taylor’s distinction between the two, Willis explains the “archive” and the “repertoire” as that of “material and ephemeral expressions [respectively] of historical and cultural narratives” (129). The killers’ repertoire thus “enacts embodied memory: performance [and] gestures . . . usually thought of as ephemeral nonreproducible knowledge” (Taylor 4). Insofar as the film serves as a repository that archives the killers’ repertoire, it is also “the paradigm of nonexperience—the repository of what is not, or at least no longer, experience of even the memory of experience” (LaCapra 23). There is then a call—a critical arousal even—for the spectator to respond to the failure of these killers to showcase remorse (unlike Anwar in *The Act of Killing*), to resist being interpellated into feeling just the initial reactions of incredulity, horror, or pity as the chilling boasts/confessions of the perpetrators is repeated throughout the film without an iota of resolution or contrition. As archive, *The Look of Silence* “is in this sense a supplement to or prosthetic device for experience and memory,” a repository which calls out for embodied spectators to respond with its affective charge of theatricality (LaCapra 23).

This notion of ethical spectatorship relies not only on the film bodies of victims like Adi but also on the perpetrators themselves. Most of them are old, with frail bodies and failing eyesight. The tenderness that Amir and Inong display as the former guides the latter

down a slippery slope on their way to the site of the reenactment attests to both their humanity and vulnerability (Figure 26).

Figure 26. Amir leads Inong carefully down a slippery slope.

As Oppenheimer remarks, “If we don’t accept the uncomfortable proposition that every perpetrator of virtually every act of evil in our history has been a human being like us, then we actually foreclose the possibility of understanding how we do this to one another and therefore make it impossible to figure out how we might prevent these things” (The Exchange: Joshua Oppenheimer and David Rieff on Genocide). Returning very briefly to his discussion of Jay Rosenblatt’s film *Human Remains* (1998), Bergen-Aurand highlights that what (potentially) disturbs spectators the most is that “it calls us to a community with others we may not want to admit: five Twentieth-century dictators” such as Adolf Hitler and Joseph Stalin (Great Directors: Jay Rosenblatt). Bergen-Aurand’s assertion (discussed earlier in the *Duch* portion of this dissertation) that “[o]nly an embodied, vulnerable human being can be responsible” finds correspondence with Oppenheimer’s earlier remark concerning ethical spectatorship (Great Directors: Jay Rosenblatt). Monsters are not responsible, they cannot be

held to account for their actions and so, to reduce these Indonesian perpetrators to monsters is to preclude them from ethics. By distancing ourselves from them and denying them their humanity and thus their culpability, we close the ethical spaces and discourses that allow us to address and respond to them.

The recognition of the perpetrators' humanity through their frail, decrepit bodies and their behavior does not, of course, mean that they are sincere, harmless elderly to be regarded with little care or scrutiny. Just as how the spectator has to essay critically the various confessions and acts of contrition from Anwar in *The Act of Killing*, and in so doing, resist being interpellated by this pat narrative resolution, so too now does this critically engaged mode of spectatorship need to be actualized. Oppenheimer spells out the intelligence (or cunning) of the perpetrators in their attempts at self-fashioning a desired image before the rolling film camera,

The camera does *not* document a pre- existing reality . . . we pretend that the camera is not there, or at least that it's not having the overwhelming influence that it inevitably has . . . The moment I start filming you, you would be inherently self- conscious. You would start staging yourself. That, in turn, is actually an opportunity to make visible the ways in which you want to be seen and the ways in which you want the world to know you. The underbelly of that, also now visible, would be your insecurities, your fears, the vulnerabilities you are trying to hide. That is an opportunity that documentary normally misses, because documentarians try to get past the self- consciousness and pretend their camera is a transparent window on to the world, when nothing could be further from the truth. ("Evil, art and politics in documentary film" 203)

It is important to recognize that, similar to how Oppenheimer failed to recognize Suryono as a survivor wishing to tell of his own traumatic past through a reenactment in *The Act of Killing*, which is all the more affectively charged because of its non-enactment, it is failure that opens up the possibility of bringing together not just perpetrators and survivors together in a community, where neither considers the other a barbarous executioner or a blasphemous atheist and/or communist, but also the potentiality of ripping apart the cloak of impunity, exculpation, and repression that remains unfaltering since the New Order period. After completing production of *The Globalization Tapes* (2003), a documentary that focused on the plight of plantation workers as they struggled to unionize themselves, Oppenheimer was interested in working with these vulnerable people to explore the then-hidden climate of fear and mass murder that silenced and cowed them into submission. Oppenheimer recounts how this proposed project was stopped in its infancy:

[T]he army threatened [the survivors] not to participate in the [proposed] film . . .

Everyone became more and more angry with this and more and more committed to breaking the silence and we thought, “How shall we do this now?” and I was told this kind of absurd proposal, “You should make a film with the killers.” So I feel like [*The Act of Killing*] is somehow a reaction to that. (Sakti 224)

It is in light of this unexpected possibility from an instance of crushing failure that we can critically examine Christopher Pavsek’s claim that “the history of cinema must be understood not as the history of its grand achievements, but rather as the history of unrealized possibilities, thwarted ambitions, and disappointed hopes” (1).

What “unrealized possibilities” could be extracted from cinema then (Pavsek 1)?

Pavsek offers one potential framework when he posits “the event of cinema,” a concept modified from Alain Badiou’s “philosophical concept of the event” (Pavsek 7). For Badiou,

“an event is not the realization/variation of a possibility that resides inside the situation. An event is the creation of a new possibility. An event changes not only the real, but also the possible” (quoted. in Pavsek 7). Such events could be said to possess,

situational transcendence [, which] refers to the way an act or artefact, while being situated or subject to contextual constraints and limited understanding, may also get beyond, or work through, its initial situation critically and transformatively, thereby giving rise to newer, more or less unpredictable, at times uncanny situations. (LaCapra 19)

The first epigraph of this dissertation thus serves as a framing device in which “[e]xperience . . . as a residual concept” overflows as a form of cinematic excess and is directed towards an embodied spectator who will respond to its affective charges (LaCapra 39). For Pavsek, it is imperative that the embodied spectator “extract[s] from the event its essential—its useful—core; one must pinpoint and portray that which makes it an “asset” for the present . . . what energy or principle or possibility inheres in the event . . . and awaits its realization *now*” (9). The events depicted in films do not then merely function as markers of human (and cinematic) failures but also as “idea[s] that sum up the possibilities that the event[s] generate as well as provid[e]. . . symbolic form[s] through which subjects are called to participate in the event” (Pavsek 7).

In a pivotal scene that seems pregnant with the possibility of reconciliation, Adi visits a former killer and his middle-aged daughter, who is now also his primary caregiver. Earlier in their conversation, the daughter has professed that she is “proud [her father] exterminated communists” (*The Look of Silence*). Her father then offers grisly details such as beheading a woman and parading the head in public and drinking his victims’ blood to give him strength. Now dumbfounded, the daughter sits in awkward silence. Her father and Adi do not break

this silence. Then, she reaches out in a gesture of reconciliation and contrition, “If your brother was killed, please forgive my father” (*The Look of Silence*). Adi responds in kind, assuring her that “[i]t’s not [her] fault that [her] father is a murderer” (*The Look of Silence*). Reaching ever further across the hostilities that divide perpetrator (and kin) from survivor (and kin), the daughter ventures further, “I feel I know you. Have we met before? . . . We know each other now. We’re like family. [My father is] old now. Consider him your own father.” (*The Look of Silence*). Does this scene function as “a model for reconciliation,” as Oppenheimer puts it?¹⁴ Certainly, the scene details the daughter’s initial pride in her father’s heroics in the war against the Communist threat and her later bewilderment at his “sadistic” actions. Unlike the other people Adi interviews, the daughter apologises and reaches out a hand to Adi, who embraces her in turn with tenderness (Figure 27).

Figure 27. As Adi and the perpetrator’s daughter embrace in newfound tenderness, her father looks away in visible discomfort.

¹⁴ <https://theconversation.com/the-look-of-silence-and-indonesias-dark-mirror-34005>

Adi and the daughter are profiled in closeup and the shot-reverse shot of their tentative faces almost excludes (physically) the father from the diegetic space/frame. This gesture of friendship and love would surely stand out for Indonesian spectators who grew up during the New Order era and internalized the propagandistic impulse to hated “communists/survivors”. Victoria K. Sakti explains that ““PKI members and their descendants [are socially configured] as a distinct evil group, almost considered as an ethnic group that should be eradicated for the national good” and prosperity of Indonesia (220). Quoting Heryanto, Sakti highlights further how ethnicity in Indonesia is “deeply internalized as something inherited, natural and inherent” and therefore, how the stigma of being a communist is passed on hereditarily (quoted in Sakti 220).

Figure 28. Adi is decidedly nonplussed after hearing of the daughter’s excuses for her father’s tales of brutality.

Can the “new” generation that inherited the trauma of 1965-66 bridge the polemics and mass killings that scarred the previous generation? What is to be made then of the daughter’s remark, almost by way of recusing her father, that he is “old and senile” (*The Look*

of Silence)? Does she hold out hope that she can salvage the New Order fiction of her father as a hero, and not a sadist? If he is indeed “old and senile,” then his shocking confessions of depravity do not hold any truth or ethical value for her anymore; she is no longer compelled to make herself vulnerable by shedding the protective (deceitful) cloak that the New Order propaganda has wrapped around her (like one of Anwar’s garrotes) in order to embrace a vile “communist”. Perhaps this scene—in which the potentiality for a new paradigm of empathy for the “new” generation is gestured at tantalizingly but ultimately results in (onscreen) failure—is, as Pavsek asserts, a heartbreaking yet vital example that “the means for resolving the insufficiency of the present lie at hand . . . perhaps not ready-at hand, but nonetheless available, if only *we* might find them” (241, emphasis added). Adi’s impassive facial expression—after hearing her utterance (which diminishes her father’s responsibility for his words)—stands in marked contrast to the earlier warmth he displayed when embracing her (Figure 28), thus underlining the failings and limits of reconciliation onscreen and the inability, in fact undesirability, of cinema successfully resolving within itself the ethical questions it raises in order to open up the potentiality of film ethics for the embodied spectator.

WE ARE ALL (NOT QUITE) ANONYMOUS

Only very few, close family and friends know my involvement in the film. I could say my father, mother, brothers, one or two uncles/aunties, but not even cousins know what I’ve been doing the last decade. Not one of my neighbors know.

Anonymous, Co-director of *The Look of Silence*¹⁵

¹⁵ See <http://birthmoviesdeath.com/2015/08/14/bmdqa-the-look-of-silences-anonymous> for an in-depth interview with the Anonymous co-director of Oppenheimer’s *The Look of Silence*.

In his *Cinema Poetica* piece entitled “Ethics Behind the Look of Silence” that “received wide circulation” (Barker), Shalahuddin Siregar charges that “[i]t was even more unethical when [Oppenheimer] chose to flee to first world countries, hailed as a hero, while his collaborators remained as anonymous directors, letting their subjects face the problems they have left behind.” While it is certainly true Oppenheimer has received accolades (a MacArthur 'genius' grant among them) for his work on the two films, Siregar’s oversight in not mentioning or even downplaying the importance of many other film collaborators who appear on film is highly regrettable. In his haste to demonise Oppenheimer’s work as that of a privileged foreigner exploiting the situation in a foreign land for personal gain, Siregar has portrayed all of Oppenheimer’s collaborators (who are not also perpetrators) as victims twice victimized, oppressed by the New Order government during the brutal 1965-66 purge and then betrayed by Oppenheimer over the course of completing both films.

In *The Look of Silence*, Adi Rukun is the most prominent example of a “true collaborator,” someone who actively participates in the filmmaking process not just as the protagonist but also a strategist in getting the perpetrators to open up about their actions during the 1965-66 killings (Stevens). It was Adi who came up with the idea to “approach people who were over 60 through his optometry work and deliberately offer free eye tests as an excuse for asking them about their memories of what happened during the genocide,” an approach that enabled both Oppenheimer and him to come up with the optometry tests/interview scheme when they interacted with the perpetrators. As Oppenheimer remarks, “Your guard is down when you’re in a dentist chair or the doctor’s office. The eye test was something we could prolong for as long as necessary that would allow the perpetrator to tell what he’d done which would prevent the situation from getting confrontational prematurely” (Saito). Adi not only has to formulate the best angle (together with Oppenheimer) on how to

get volatile perpetrators and powerful men to talk to him about the killings, he also has to carry out the necessary acts of discretion and propriety that would allow both the film crew and him to be extricated from a hostile situation, such as the deferential silence and look of supplication he gives to Amir Siahaan, a former death squad commander, when the latter wonders aloud whether the interview is “a secret communist activity” (*The Look of Silence*). Rather than it simply being the case that “Adi’s motivation as the main character was made into the projection of the director’s vision,” Adi is as much in control of and responsible for the creation of the film as Oppenheimer (Siregar). In considering Siregar’s rather simplistic caution that “we have to remember that it was the director who created the scene, and has the full power over the scene,” this part of the essay will now focus on the omission or obfuscation of less prominent collaborators who worked on the films.

In *The Act of Killing*, besides the courage Suryono displayed in trying to get his stepfather’s murder reenacted on camera, there is another instance of collaboration involving a non-perpetrator, wherein a makeup artist reveals to the perpetrators both his apprehension and awe that he is doing their makeup for a reenactment.

Figure 29. The film crew prepare the stage lights for a reenactment sequence.

It is significant that the entire sequence (centred on Suryono's disclosure of himself as a victim and his subsequent "murder" onscreen) begins with the stage lights being raised to prepare the soundstage for the subsequent reenactment (Figure 29). Oppenheimer once again showcases the contrived nature of his essay film, in which a literal (filmic) soundstage encompasses all of the perpetrators, their boasts, their fears, and their acts of contrition and their resultant essayistic gestures towards the embodied spectator. As Adi Zulkadry muses on his strategies to justify the killings he has committed to Anwar Congo—"It's all about finding the right excuse."—a makeup artist sets about (ironically) making the two killers look like bloodied victims (Figure 30).

Figure 30. As the makeup artist (in a songkok) goes to work, Suryono looks on with interest in the background.

Curiously, when the makeup artist is heard speaking for the first time—“At first, I was scared . . . These are top gangsters!”—, the image onscreen is that of Adi Zulkadry reclining in a chair (Figure 31).

Figure 31. Curiously, the speech utterance does not correspond to the image (of a “bloodied victim”) on screen.

The camera then cuts to a medium-shot of the makeup artist and his colleague helping Herman Koto put on an elaborate costume. “Like you [Herman,] and Anwar . . . Terrifying! And making a film! It’s shocking!” the makeup artist remarks while gesticulating animatedly with his hands (Figure 32).

Figure 32. As the makeup artist expresses his surprise at working with renowned gangsters, Herman looks on with disinterest.

The makeup artist does not elaborate on what exactly is “shocking” to him. Is it the notion that these killers are so “open” about the atrocities/heroics that they carried out in order to safeguard Indonesia’s security and prosperity (according to their own self-aggrandizing narrative)? Or is it the fact that he, a fairly common man, is working with gangsters and killers, people whom he read about in prescribed school textbooks that upheld them as national heroes (as set out by New Order propaganda)? It is impossible to know as the camera immediately cuts to the scene in which Suryono discloses his father’s murder at the hands of the killer’s peers. The makeup artist is not featured prominently again in the film. It is telling then, that in spite of the general enthusiasm displayed by the makeup artist at the collaborative work he is engaged in with these killers, of his contribution to make the reenactment as impressive as possible, he is listed as “Anonymous” in the end credits, along with his two fellow anonymous colleagues. The climate of fear and apprehension that ordinary Indonesians have to navigate is readily apparent to the spectator, as even if the disjuncture between the makeup artist’s enthusiasm at work and his reluctance to reveal his

name is not picked up by the spectator, then the scores of people listed as “Anonymous” for their roles as Line Producers, Gaffers, and Carpenters (to name but three) would surely elicit or even provoke a response. A series of scrolling credits that at one point is filled with anonymous attributions (Figure 33) assails the spectator, prompting introspection into the climate of fear in which the film was created as well as the nature of collaboration (between director, perpetrators and anonymous film crew) as well as the responsibility owed to them.

Figure 33. With the entire frame, suffused in Anonymous placeholders, the spectator cannot but inquire as to the state of affairs that necessitated this precaution.

If, as Siregar charges, Oppenheimer owes all of his accolades to these anonymous people, what then does the spectator owe to them? Siregar assails both films for being unethical, for Oppenheimer collaborating with perpetrators in the first film, and exploiting Adi and the family members of the perpetrators in the second film, but he does not acknowledge the crucial role played by the (anonymous) Indonesians who worked on/in the film, on camera and/or off camera. Perhaps then, acknowledgement of these people listed as “Anonymous” as important collaborators should be the first step into which film ethics can take root in the

spectator's mind, as the failure to be recognised for their work calls upon the spectator to do just that at the very moment of watching.

An examination of the different ways in which the theatrical version and director's cut of *The Act of Killing* arrange their credit sequences suggests as much. In the theatrical version, the camera cuts to black after we see Anwar exit the handbag store. The credits that flash on the screen read: A Film by Joshua Oppenheimer. The text then fades and is replaced by the fantastical image of the giant fish structure, Anwar and Herman dancing along with a bevy of dancers clad in pink. The credits now read: Characters (In Order of Appearance). The list contains only the perpetrators' and their superiors' names. The list then fades and is replaced by the directors' and producer's names. "Anonymous" is listed as a co-director. Only after several fade ins and outs of the credits is it made clear to the spectator that a large portion of the film crew has chosen to be listed as "Anonymous," a delay and deferral that generates the affect of critical introspection in the spectator, who is now confronted or, following Rascaroli again, implicated by the multitude of "Anonymous" onscreen. In the director's cut of the film, the camera cuts from Anwar standing pensively in the stairway to the fantastical image, rendering the dance sequence part of the film proper (as opposed to being part of the end credits sequence, which is how theatrical version's end credits sequence is arranged). There is a hard cut to black, and the first section of the scrolling credits is now "Characters (In Order of Appearance)" which still lists only the perpetrators' and their superiors' names. In so doing, the director's cut of the film here highlights the importance of collaboration—beginning with the perpetrators-collaborators, and then briskly proceeding with the string of anonymous film crew. The differences in credit sequences, as well the speed in which they proceed along to showcase the multitude of "Anonymous" titles, attests then to the fact "that "The Act of Killing" would not exist without an anonymous Indonesian crew – including an anonymous Indonesian co-director" ("Act of Killing' Director Joshua

Oppenheimer on How The Oscars Gave The Film ‘A Second Life’). In changing the credits sequence in the director’s cut of *The Act of Killing* to showcase the centrality of collaboration and scores of “Anonymous” film crew, Oppenheimer asks the spectator to bear witness to the efforts of these anonymous people, to acknowledge their importance as collaborators in the films (*The Look of Silence*’s end credits proceeds in much the same way as the director’s cut of *The Act of Killing*), and to inquire into the failure of the Indonesian government in acknowledging the atrocities committed during 1965-66, necessitating the veil of secrecy/safety that “Anonymous” affords them. This chapter concludes with closing remarks (written on the day *The Act of Killing* was nominated for an Oscar) by the Anonymous crew who have so far been unable to claim credit for the work they have done on both films, let alone live without fear of repression or worse:

The film is a call to remember everything that has been forgotten or hidden over the course of humanity’s long and dark history. The truth has not yet been brought to light, justice has not yet been served, an apology has not yet been uttered, victims have not yet been rehabilitated (let alone compensated). Discrimination against survivors continues. An official history that remains silent on the atrocities (yet glorifies the extermination of the communists in general terms), is still taught to our children. The government continues to anoint architects of the genocide as national heroes. All this to keep people paralysed by fear, so that ordinary Indonesians dare not hold them accountable for wanton corruption. We hope this nomination will remind us — and all human beings everywhere — always to fight against forgetting.¹⁶

¹⁶ <http://www.indiewire.com/2014/02/act-of-killing-director-joshua-oppenheimer-on-how-the-oscars-gave-the-film-a-second-life-29670/>

Conclusion

The Look of Ruminatio

. . . I'll just say there's no truth in cinema. But what you feel – cinema can bring you on the road, put you on the very long journey to truth. It's a lot. The truth is what you feel after watching the film, not in the image itself.

Rithy Panh, "Memories of murder: Rithy Panh on 'The Missing Picture'"

In *The Act of Killing*, you see Anwar go through this recursive process several times, which is really how we made the film of shooting a scene, watching it, shooting a scene, and watching it. Every time [Anwar] watches it, we see doubt all over his face.

Joshua Oppenheimer, "Joshua Oppenheimer on Capturing 'The Look of Silence'"

In all four essay films discussed, the praxis of watching—of perpetrators watching themselves carrying out their reenactments, of victims watching the perpetrators reenact and recount their killings, and of the spectator watching all of these onscreen—becomes central to answering the question posed by this dissertation's title: What remains amiss? These films have archived the incriminating documents of a murderous Khmer Rouge government, and the reenactments and confessions/boasts of perpetrators but there is still a remarkable and startling lack of social change, acknowledgement of atrocities committed against victims, restitution (social justice and financial), and reconciliation between perpetrators, victims, and the progeny of both, failings that have been essayed by the films through the problematics of reenactment, representation, authenticity, failure, culpability, and responsibility (owed to the victims and the essayistic impulse)

The present-day ruling parties of Indonesia and Cambodia have not allowed the victims of the respective traumatic events to be recognised and participate in the national

discourse. Oppenheimer has resisted submitting his films to the Indonesian censorship board as a (likely) ban on either film would “become an excuse in Indonesia for the army or paramilitary groups to physically attack screenings.” He decries how the previous government under Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono gave “no indication of even considering the National Human Rights Commission’s demands for a presidential apology or truth commission.”¹⁷ The placeholders “Anonymous” are still used “for every Indonesian involved in the film” (“BMDQ&A: The Look of Silence’s Anonymous”) and Oppenheimer has stated that, should he return to Indonesia, “I’m just not sure I would get out alive again” (“Joshua Oppenheimer Won’t Go Back to Indonesia”). Hun Sen, the current Prime Minister of Cambodia and “former Khmer Rouge commander[,] has consolidated his grip on power through a web of patronage and brute military strength.”¹⁸ The “culture of dialogue” that Hun Sen fostered with his chief political rival Sam Rainsy has been described as “basically a farce” by Ou Virak, the head of a Phnom Penh-based policy institute called Future Forum, when 11 opposition politicians were been arrested and crackdowns on demonstrations initiated¹⁹. Rainsy currently resides in exile in France, having been “sentenced in absentia last month to five years in prison for posting a fake government pledge to dissolve the border with Vietnam.”²⁰

If, as Pavsek postulates, “the means for resolving the insufficiency of the present [could] lie at hand . . . perhaps not ready-at-hand, but nonetheless available, if only we might find them” (241) within cinema (and its attendant failures onscreen), then the need for a critical and ethical praxis of spectatorship becomes all the more urgent in the face of not just repressive state regimes but also the tendency for cinema to be pure “spectacle in its

¹⁷ <http://america.aljazeera.com/articles/2013/9/22/joshua-oppenheimeronfilmingtheactofkilling.html>

¹⁸ <http://www.ft.com/intl/cms/s/0/b01c354e-13f2-11e4-8485-00144feabdc0.html#axzz38lhRbUJK>

¹⁹ <http://thediplomat.com/2015/10/cambodias-withering-culture-of-dialogue/>

²⁰ <http://www.straitstimes.com/asia/se-asia/cambodia-pm-hun-sen-files-fresh-lawsuit-against-opposition-leader-sam-rainsy>

heightened, virtual mode, with more garish violence and special effects than ever before” (Mitchell 151) turning documentaries, documented suffering and anguish into ready-to-consume 90-minute features with easy resolutions at the ready. The repeated visual and essayistic motifs of watching (others) highlights the spectator’s own responsibility when watching these essay films, to “feel implicated” in this shared ethical space that the cinematic encounter opens up but fails (intentionally or otherwise) to resolve within itself (“Joshua Oppenheimer on Capturing ‘The Look of Silence’”). If Panh is being overly optimistic when he suggests that “cinema opens a new field for people... when people watch a film they come together, to watch and talk together. They change immediately,” we should still retain the core idealism embedded in his words. All four films feature extended “moments of silence — times where [the camera] stops and you’re in the space of the absent dead” (“Joshua Oppenheimer on Capturing ‘The Look of Silence’”). To be made aware—just like how Panh recognises and avoids “intruding” upon the now-empty cell in *S21*—of an overbearing absence (of victims, of truth, of justice), in spite of the copious amounts of archival footage and morbid reenactments, to avoid glossing over and consuming uncritically the images and sounds projected within the cinema, and instead, to practice an ethical and critical spectatorship that engages with, not evades, the affective charges and sites of failure that the cinematic encounter with the essay film generates; that is our collective and individual responsibility, at the very moment of watching.

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